2026 NC STATE FOOTBALL PREVIEW

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FOR CJ BAILEY

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THE WOLFPACKER
AN INDEPENDENT MAGAZINE COVERING NC STATE SPORTS

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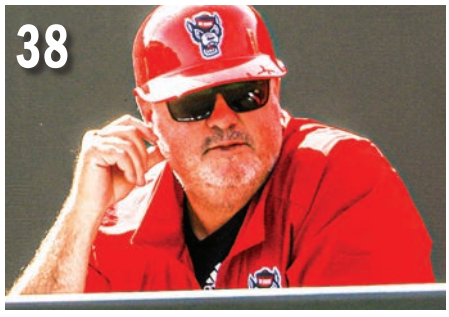
22 **FIGHTING SPIRIT**
A Reinvigorated Dave Doeren Gets Set To Lead NC State Into The 2026 Season



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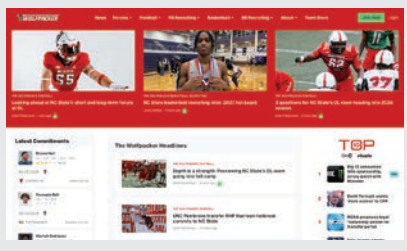

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Member Notes

A new member of Wolfpack Nation, Mary Blaise Roberts is pictured in cheerleading garb. She is the great granddaughter of Wolfpack Club members John R. (NCSU BA 1969, BS 1970) and Doris W. Gray of Tarboro, N.C. The new cheerleader's parents are Anna Keck Moore Roberts (NCSU BS 2017) and Sheldon B. Roberts (NCSU BS 2017, MS 2018). Her great-great-grandfather even attended State College back in the day!

In order to submit a picture to appear in *The Wolfpacker*, please send a *high-resolution* photo with a caption as well as your Wolfpack Club member number to Donnell Priest at donnell.priest@wolfpackclub.com. We will be happy to place it in an upcoming issue if we have enough room. However, we can only reserve space for Wolfpack Club members.

NCSU Alumni Wolfpack Club member John M. Daniels, Class of 1981, and lifetime Wolfpack fan Susan Reeves at Omaha Beach, Normandy, France.

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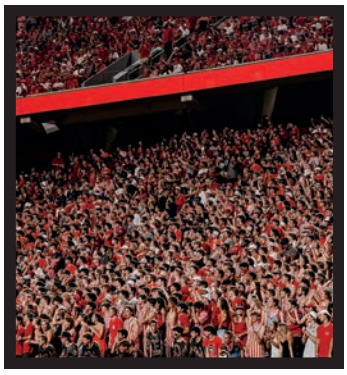

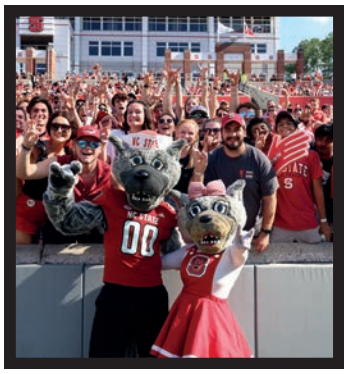

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The NCAA has recently provided additional updates to member institutions regarding presumed NIL violations. As such, a representative of athletics interests (e.g., booster) should not contact prospects or their family members about either recruiting or NIL arrangements. A representative of athletics interests (e.g., booster) should also not enter into an NIL arrangement with a prospect until that individual has matriculated into NC State.

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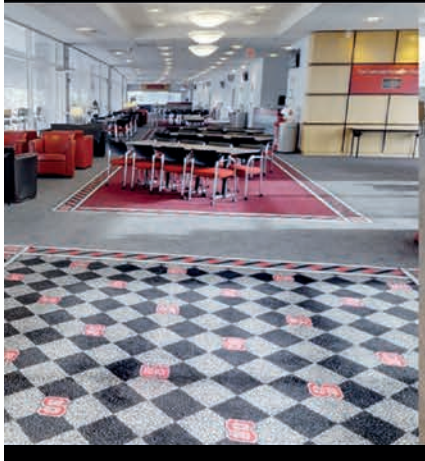

DAIL CLUB (WAITLIST)

WOLVES DEN (WAITLIST)

LUXURY SUITES (WAITLIST)

WOLFPACK CLUB STAFF SPOTLIGHT: Brian Simorka, *Assistant AD/Revenue Generation*

Where are you from? I was born in St. Louis, and then my family moved to New Jersey, where I went to middle school and high school.

Where did you go to school? I went to NC State and graduated with a degree in parks, recreation and tourism management from the College of Natural Resources.

What are your current responsibilities at the Wolfpack Club? I oversee the sales and marketing efforts for the eight revenue-generating sports, which are football, volleyball, men's and women's basketball, wrestling, gymnastics, baseball and softball. I have a sales and service team that reports to me on the ticketing side. I've have the digital strategy unit, which is responsible for the website, social media and our digital ad space. I also have the data analytics team and our creative content teams.

An NC State graduate, Simorka spent much of his career working in professional sports before returning to his alma mater in 2020.

PHOTO COURTESY THE WOLFPACK CLUB

What did you do before joining the Wolfpack Club? Most of my career has been in professional sports. I spent the better part of 15 years in baseball at various levels, both major league and minor league. In the past 10 years before coming to NC State, I was with the Durham Bulls in a couple of different roles.

What's your favorite part about working at the Wolfpack Club? The interactions with our fans and with our donors. They have stories for days, and it's even more amplified here at the college level because of the passion for college athletics that folks have.

What are your hobbies? My family, we're big travelers. We love to get out and travel to see the country and the world. We'll go just about anywhere and go on a hike.

What's your favorite TV show? "Parks and Recreation."

What's your favorite movie? "Back to the Future."

What's your favorite musical artist? Dave Matthews Band. I have seen them or Dave Matthews by himself 52 times in my life.

What's your favorite restaurant? The Angus Barn. That's where my wife and I had our wedding reception.

What's your favorite NC State memory? My sophomore year here at NC State in 2003, I was a student athletic trainer with football. We had a road trip to Ohio State that season with Philip Rivers as our quarterback, and we took them to triple overtime in their place. The Horseshoe was silent at the end of the fourth quarter going into overtime. Their crowd was stunned. It was one of those really cool moments. Even though we lost the game, you walked away thinking, this is the fun stuff.

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TRACKING THE PACK

Gunner Rivers Works To Help Build NC State's 2027 Class

Even though Rivers doesn't use social media, he's been a persuasive voice for the Wolfpack. The four-star quarterback connects with potential teammates via phone calls and text messages.

PHOTO COURTESY GUNNER RIVERS

BY NOAH FLEISCHMAN

Gunner Rivers isn't like many high school athletes in the current era.

Rivers, a four-star quarterback from St. Michael Catholic in Fairhope, Ala., is not glued to his phone scrolling social media. Nor is he posting highlight videos of himself, even though he's thrown for more than 10,000 yards and surpassed 100 touchdowns to this point in his prep career.

Rivers doesn't have social media accounts. He's not on X or Instagram. There is an account on the latter platform that appears to be his, but it actually belongs to someone unknown to the rising senior signal-caller. "Whoever's running that, good for them, I guess," Rivers said.

Instead of spending his time online, Rivers tends to focus on his friends and family, living in the moment.

But as one of the most well-known names in NC State's 2027 recruiting class, Rivers has become a key recruiting asset for the Wolfpack in a group that continues to grow. And because he's opted out of the social media platforms that other recruits typically use to connect with each other, he's done his recruiting the old-fashioned way: via phone calls and text messages.

Rivers, who is listed in the Rivals Industry Ranking as the nation's No. 136 overall prospect, uses his iPhone to forge relationships with prospects the Wolfpack wants in the fold, as well as the other committed players. Despite being described as a laid-back person by those who have interacted with him, he has tried to go outside his comfort zone in courting others to join him in Raleigh.

"It's kind of weird for me, personally," Rivers said. "You get recruited for about two years, then you commit somewhere and you try to take a role as a coach to try to help other guys commit, too. It's definitely fun and a little challenging. You talk to some people that just shut you down, but it's worth it to get some of these guys coming to NC State."

> **"It's definitely fun and a little challenging. You talk to some people that just shut you down, but it's worth it to get some of these guys coming to NC State."**
>
> Rivers on his role as a peer recruiter for the Wolfpack

Rivers is the oldest son of NC State legend and longtime NFL starting quarterback Philip Rivers. He's done his best to get others to follow him to the program he grew up admiring. The legacy prospect helped elicit a commitment from four-star safety KJ Caldwell of Lilburn (Ga.) Parkview. Listed as the nation's No. 132 overall player in the Rivals Industry Ranking, Caldwell became the Pack's highest-rated commit when he joined the class on May 22.

Caldwell and Rivers developed a connection over the phone before meeting in person for the first time during their official visit in June.

"Gunner is a chill dude," Caldwell said with a laugh. "He doesn't go out much. He's got his head on straight. I

2027 WOLFPACK FOOTBALL COMMITMENTS

Name	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Rating*	Home	School
Moses Barker	K	6-1	175	★★★	Fuquay Varina, N.C.	Willow Springs
Jacob Burns	IOL	6-7	290	★★★	Kingston, Ontario	Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School (Ga.)
KJ Caldwell	S	5-11	170	★★★★	Lilburn, Ga.	Parkview
Jadell Carter	DE	6-5	200	★★★	Fort Myers, Fla.	South Fort Myers
Griffin Cockerham	TE	6-3	220	★★★	Raleigh	Cardinal Gibbons
Christian Freeman	RB	5-9	190	★★★	Raleigh	Southeast Raleigh
Jake Godfree	LB	5-11	220	★★★	Lawrenceville, Ga.	North Gwinnett
Colt Hauser	IOL	6-1	275	★★★	Jensen Beach, Fla.	Cardinal Newman
Bryson Hurt	IOL	6-4	300	★★★	Gainesville, Ga.	Gainesville
CJ Jordan II	TE	6-7	235	★★★	Marietta, Ga.	Walton
Julius LaRosa	DL	6-1	280	★★★	Jacksonville, Fla.	University Christian
Amir Moore	DL	6-7	265	★★★	Harrells, N.C.	Harrells Christian Academy
Gunner Rivers	QB	6-3	230	★★★★	Fairhope, Ala.	St. Michael Catholic
Khy'lieb Rodriguez	WR	5-11	161	★★★	Charlotte, N.C.	Ardrey Kell
Conner Rutherford	OT	6-6	295	★★★	Chillicothe, Ohio	Chillicothe
Alex Scott	S	5-10	180	★★★	Lyons, Ga.	Toombs County
Tre Warren III	IOL	6-4	335	★★★	Columbus, Ga.	Carver
Landon Williams	WR	6-0	193	★★★	Katy, Texas	Katy Jordan

know I need to be around somebody like that."

In addition to Caldwell, Rivers helped seal the commitment of three-star interior offensive lineman Colt Hauser of Jensen Beach (Fla.) Cardinal Newman. NC State also earned a pledge in early June from three-star offensive lineman Jacob Burns of Rabun Gap-Nacoochee (Ga.), who spent time with Rivers.

As is always the case in recruiting, there have been some battles that haven't gone his way. Three-star wide receiver Jonathan Dillon of Southern Durham (N.C.) High picked Duke on June 17, choosing the Blue Devils over NC State, Florida State and Rutgers. Dillon had been widely seen as leaning toward Duke in the weeks leading up to his commitment, but that didn't stop Rivers from trying his best to change the receiver's mind.

Thanks in part to Rivers' efforts, the Wolfpack's class numbered 18 players as of early July. NC State went on a commitment binge in the late spring and early summer, landing 14 pledges between May 10 and June 25.

After Caldwell and Rivers, the class's highest rated players are Burns (No. 611 nationally), receiver Landon Williams (No. 650), offensive tackle Conner Rutherford (No. 699) and safety Alex Scott (No. 705). The class was listed 43rd nationally and 11th in the ACC in the Rivals Industry Team Rankings.

With NC State looking to finish off the class in the months ahead, Rivers will continue to do what he's been doing since he committed, putting himself out there with those he could be playing alongside at Carter-Finley Stadium in the years to come. He's active in the commits group chat, especially after having met six of his future teammates, and is looking to help persuade uncommitted prospects around the country to join him in Raleigh.

"I've just been trying to build a relationship," Rivers said, "so they know who I am as a person and what I believe in. Hopefully, they can come join the Pack." ■

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RED AND WHITE NOTEBOOK

With NC State and North Carolina set to meet only once in ACC play, the First Horizon Coliseum in Greensboro is expected to host a nonconference game between the rivals during the 2026-27 season.

PHOTO COURTESY GREENSBORO COMPLEX

NC State Planning Nonconference Matchup Against Tar Heels

NC State and North Carolina have one of the more intriguing college basketball rivalries in the nation. Even though the two teams met just once last season under the ACC's new scheduling model and are set to do the same in conference play this year, the programs were nearing a deal in late June to change that.

The Tar Heels and Wolfpack were finalizing plans for a neutral-site matchup to be held at the First Horizon Coliseum in Greensboro. It would be a nonconference matchup at a date to be determined, the first such meeting between the two storied rivals since the 1977-78 season when they played in Greensboro on Dec. 3. The Wolfpack and Tar Heels played each other three times that year, with UNC winning the nonconference clash, 87-82.

When NC State and UNC met last season, the Pack rolled to an 82-58 victory at Lenovo Center on Feb. 17. The 2025-26 campaign was the first since 1919 in which the teams didn't play in Chapel Hill. Their next ACC meeting will take place at the Smith Center, making the upcoming season the first since 1947 in which the teams won't square off in Raleigh.

The upcoming games between the Wolfpack and Tar Heels will be historic in that they will pit two first-year coaches against each other — NC State's Justin Gainey and his UNC counterpart, Michael Malone. That hasn't happened since the 1946-47 season, when Everett Case led the Wolfpack to a 48-46 win in Chapel Hill against Tom Scott's Tar Heels.

North Carolina is the latest high-profile addition to the Wolfpack's nonconference schedule. In November, NC State will travel to Nassau to play in the Baha Mar Bahamas Hoops Championship, which is set to feature Seton Hall, Wisconsin and a yet-to-be-announced fourth team. The Wolfpack also has neutral-site matchups planned with Tennessee (Dec. 6 in Nashville, Tenn.) and Ole Miss (Dec. 19 in either Tupelo, Miss., or South Haven, Miss.).

The Pack's only known home nonconference game as of early July was against South Carolina in the ACC-SEC Challenge on Dec. 1.

NC State was originally scheduled to complete a home-and-home series with Virginia Commonwealth, making a road trip to the Siegel Center in Richmond, but it bought out that contest. The Wolfpack is due to pay the Rams $190,000 for backing out of the game.

The ACC has not yet unveiled its full schedule, but NC State knows who and where it will play. The Pack's home-only opponents are Boston College, Clemson, Florida State, Louisville, Notre Dame, Pitt and SMU. In addition to North Carolina, its away-only foes will be Duke, Georgia Tech, Miami, Stanford, Virginia and Virginia Tech. The two conference opponents it will play home and away are Cal and Wake Forest.

Brittany Morris Rejoins Women's Hoops Staff

After spending one season away from NC State, women's basketball assistant Brittany Morris will return to the Wolfpack, the team announced June 12. Morris, who previously served as a graduate assistant from 2015-17 and then as a full-time assistant under head coach Wes Moore from 2021-25, was at Louisville last season. She will fill the role vacated by Simon Harris, who left for Illinois earlier this offseason.

"We're excited to bring Brittany back home," Moore said in a statement. "She was instrumental to our Final Four run a couple of years ago, both from a recruiting and player development standpoint. With her prior knowledge and experience, it should be a seamless transition, allowing us to hit the court running."

During her one season away from Raleigh, Morris helped Louisville to a 29-8 record, including a 15-3 mark in ACC play, en route to an appearance in the league championship game and a trip to the NCAA Tournament's Sweet 16.

For Morris, a Raleigh native, returning to the Pack appears to have been an easy decision.

"NC State has always had a special place in my heart," she said. "I'm excited to return to a place where we achieved championships and reached a Final Four. The opportunity to help grow and mentor young women while continuing to foster a championship culture is something I'm truly passionate about."

In her first four seasons with the Wolfpack, Morris helped the team to a 111-30 overall record, including a 55-17 mark against ACC competition. NC State finished in the Associated Press top 10 three times during that span, including the team's run to the 2024 Final Four.

— Noah Fleischman

SITTING DOWN WITH: Football Offensive Coordinator Kurt Roper

NC State coach Dave Doeren tabbed longtime assistant Kurt Roper as his new offensive coordinator ahead of the 2025 season. Roper returned to a role he had filled on three other coaching staffs, beginning at Duke in 2008, so he was comfortable being the one calling plays from the press box level once again. He had previously been NC State's quarterbacks coach, helping recruit and tutor current junior signal-caller CJ Bailey.

In his first season overseeing the offense, the Wolfpack posted its highest average scoring output (30.2 points per game) since 2021 (33.1). NC State scored on 90.9 percent of drives that reached the red zone.

With Bailey returning for his third season as starter, sophomore Will Wilson having gained experience last year and senior Tad Hudson transferring in from Coastal Carolina, the Pack looks strong at the game's most crucial position, prompting optimism for the upcoming season. Here are the highlights of a recent Q&A with Roper ahead of the 2026 campaign.

What's it like having an experienced quarterback room going into this season?

"Experience is the best teacher you can have. With CJ going into his third year of starting, the conversations just flow so much easier.

NC State averaged 30.2 points per game in Roper's first season as offensive coordinator, ranking eighth in the ACC.

PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE ATHLETICS

> **"When you look at last year, we had a guy who threw for over 3,000 yards and we had the leading rusher in the conference. ... I'd like to stay in that world where you've got to defend the run and the pass with us."**

He can see everything in his mind's eye. He's to the point where we're speaking the same language pretty consistently.

"And with Will going into his second season with real reps under his belt, it's not his first rodeo. We've been able to spend a bunch of time together. We're all speaking the same language. Then, when you get a guy like Tad coming into your room that has played high-level football, it helps you out in a lot of different ways."

How would you evaluate calling plays last season for the first time since 2017 when you were at South Carolina?

"I don't know that I've sat and just evaluated it. It had been a while, but I've done it so much in my career that once I got back into the day-to-day of putting practice scripts together and calling it, then it came back pretty easy.

"I think the biggest thing where I was fortunate was to learn some good football from coaches like Tim Beck and Robert Anae. I was able to grow some ideas and thoughts and adjust to today's game. It's a different game. Every year, this game changes a little bit, and you've got to adjust. While I'm still running the same system, it's got more variables to it."

Was there anything you liked about what your unit was able to do last year that you want to build on this season?

"You always want to be multiple. You've got to be able to run and throw the ball. I don't think you can be a one-dimensional group. When you look at last year, we had a guy who threw for over 3,000 yards and we had the leading rusher in the conference. Hopefully, that makes us a challenge to prepare for and play against. I'd like to stay in that world where you've got to defend the run and the pass with us."

How helpful is having a balanced offensive attack in your job?

"You've got to have both. I think it's a necessity. To help a quarterback, you've got to be able to run the football. To help the offensive line, you've got to let them come off the ball physically, at times. It can't always be going back.

"To create explosive plays and threaten the defense downfield, you've got to be able to throw the ball, right? Having the talent we've had, we've had the ability to do all those things. Hopefully, we're able to do it again this year."

Where do you hope the offense can grow this season?

"At the end of the day, our responsibility is to score more points than the opponent. We were one of the top red zone scoring teams in the country. If we can improve a little bit more on third downs and stay on the field, we can hopefully increase our point totals. That's what this game gets down to, scoring more points."

— Noah Fleischman

Dave Doeren Applauds Changes To NCAA's Eligibility Model

BY NOAH FLEISCHMAN

Three years ago, quarterback MJ Morris walked into Dave Doeren's office in early November and asked to sit out the rest of the season.

Due to Devin Leary's injury, Morris hadn't had a chance to redshirt as a true freshman in 2022, appearing in five games. When Virginia transfer Brennan Armstrong arrived in Raleigh ahead of the 2023 season, the plan was to start the veteran and let Morris use the redshirt he had been forced to forgo the year before. But when NC State got off to a 3-2 start, Doeren found himself looking for a spark and promoted Morris to the starting job.

The Carrollton, Ga., native went 3-1 as the starter, including wins over Clemson and Miami, but elected to shut himself down after his fourth game to preserve a year of eligibility. It was an unprecedented move, one that appeared to be aimed at saving a season's worth of NIL earnings on the back end of his career.

While Morris' example was an unusual case, there won't be any such drama moving forward because the four-game redshirt threshold has been scrapped as part of a major overhaul of the NCAA's eligibility rules. In June, college sports' governing body approved a new age-based eligibility model that allows athletes in all sports to play five seasons in five years. Redshirts, both developmental and medical, are gone. So are waivers to extend one's clock.

Doeren publicly advocated for the rule change last September, and he welcomed its recent passage.

"I'm happy it happened," he said. "It's good to see something positive happen in the sport."

In NC State's case, 19 football players stand to benefit from the added year of eligibility. Most notably, junior quarterback CJ Bailey, sophomore quarterback Will Wilson and senior linebacker Popo Aguirre all have the option for a fifth year that they wouldn't have had before the rule change passed.

While the Wolfpack has the chance to hold onto some of its critical players for a season longer than the program might have expected going into this year's roster-building process, the biggest impact of the new eligibility rules appears to be within the special teams unit. In the past, special teams coordinator Todd Goebbel had to balance how many games he used freshmen or sophomores that were looking to redshirt on his kicking units. It led to a revolving door at certain spots, with the staff looking to keep each player at their four-game limit for as long as possible.

Doeren has been a longstanding advocate of the new eligibility rules, noting that they will help with player development.

PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE ATHLETICS

Now, however, that math equation won't be needed since each player will use the same amount of eligibility in a year, whether they appear in one game or 12 in a given season. The same can be said for a blowout victory when the backups are inserted into a game to earn critical experience.

"It helps a lot," Doeren said. "Say you're in Week 8 of the season and you've been able to play guys that were ready to play without thinking about how this impacts the next week, you're just playing the guys that are most capable of helping you win. ... Any plays in the game are good for a freshman or a guy who hasn't played at all. I think it allows us to do what's best for the kids and for them to maximize their window of opportunity."

NC State prides itself on developing homegrown talent. Doeren is excited that he and his staff now can reward players who have proven themselves on the practice field by putting them in games without jeopardizing their eligibility status.

At the same time, he's also happy that the four-game redshirt rule is disappearing since it can't be used as a negotiating tactic to extend players' careers.

"They should be going to college for a lot of reasons, but one of them should be to play as fast as they can and get on that field," Doeren said. "When the opportunity is presented for them to do that, sitting out shouldn't even be in consideration. I'm excited to be able to utilize the entire window that they're here."

There won't be another Morris situation, no matter how rare it may be. Instead, Doeren and the rest of the college coaching community around the country have a clear understanding of how to manage their rosters going forward.

In a rare occurrence, it appears the NCAA made an adjustment that the coaches can get behind.

"It's nice to see a rule change that helps coaches for once," Doeren said. "It's been a while." ■

PACK PERFORMERS

Ty Head, Baseball

Head became the third player in NC State history to earn a Gold Glove from the American Baseball Coaches Association. The rising junior center fielder from Winter Garden, Fla., joined outfielder Brett Williams and first baseman Austin Murr as the only NC Staters to be saluted as the top defensive players in the country at their respective positions. Williams was honored in 2013, while Murr earned his Gold Glove in 2021. Head, a third-team All-ACC honoree, had 131 putouts and 2 assists for the Wolfpack this past season. He started all 56 games and didn't commit a single error.

Victoria Osuigwe, Women's Tennis

Osuigwe was the highest-ranked American recruit ever to sign with the NC State women's tennis program, and she lived up to that billing as a freshman, earning National Rookie of the Year recognition in June from the Intercollegiate Tennis Association. Osuigwe, who was ranked No. 2 by the Tennis Recruiting Network coming out of IMG Academy in Bradenton, Fla., in 2025, teamed with junior Gabriella Broadfoot to win the NCAA doubles championship last fall. She was also successful in singles competition, compiling a 21-5 record in dual matches during the 2026 season.

Angelina Napoleon, Women's Track and Field

Napoleon was NC State's top finisher at the NCAA Outdoor Track and Field Championships in June. The middle-distance standout from Allegany, N.Y., capped her junior year by placing fourth in the 3,000-meter steeplechase, finishing in a season-best 9:35.56 to claim first-team All-America honors at Hayward Field in Eugene, Ore. Napoleon was one of two Wolfpack runners to qualify for the steeplechase final. Senior Kate Putman also earned first-team All-America laurels with her sixth-place finish. Competing in the event for only the fifth time in her career, the Cicero, N.Y., native crossed the finish line in 9:45.96.

Matty Singleton, Wrestling

Singleton, a two-time ACC champion and 2025 All-American, added to his list of accomplishments in June when he won the 79-kilogram (174-pound) title at the U23 Freestyle Nationals. Competing for the Wolfpack RTC, Singleton defeated Oregon State's Daschle Lamar in the best-of-three final series in Geneva, Ohio. He won by technical fall, 11-0, in his first match against the 2026 Pac-12 champion, then followed that victory with an 11-5 decision to clinch the title. The redshirt senior from Moreland, Ga., will compete for the U.S. at the U23 World Championships in Las Vegas in October. **— Matt Herb**

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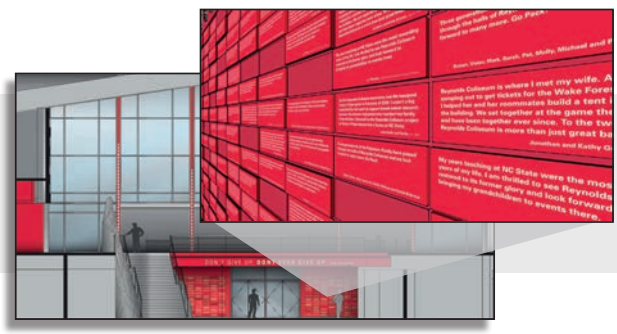

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- In order for the Wolfpack Club to accommodate requests for plaques to be placed next to each other, these orders must be placed together with proper instructions. Every effort will be made to accommodate these requests.
- Your message must fit within the spaces provided on the plaque size.
- All text will be a standard size, font, and style. Greek letters and other symbols not found on a standard keyboard may not be used.
- The Wolfpack Club reserves the right to exclude orders that it deems to contain inappropriate language.
- The Wolfpack Club will determine the final placement of all plaques.
- Message area is 330 characters maximum, with a signature line of 75 characters.

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PACK PICTURE

Summer School

NC State filled an urgent need in April when it hired Justin Gainey to take over the men's basketball program following Will Wade's abrupt departure.

Now, all it needed was a team. Filling *that* urgent need was Gainey's responsibility, and he quickly went to work, signing nine transfers, a European player and a freshman recruit to accompany the Wolfpack's two returnees — junior guard Paul McNeil Jr. and redshirt freshman forward Zymicah Wilkins.

Gainey has been working this summer to mold NC State's disparate parts into a cohesive whole. On June 8, he met with players and delivered a hopeful message with an eye toward the season ahead.

"It's going to be a great year, and I want you guys to enjoy every moment of it," he said. "I'll never say it's going to be easy. But anything worth achieving isn't easy, because if it were easy, everybody would do it."

— Matt Herb

PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE ATHLETICS

NUMBERS AND QUOTES

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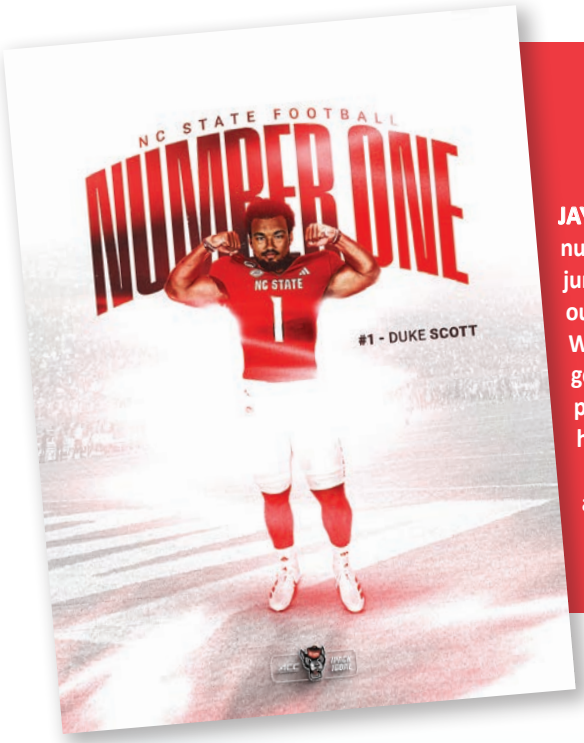


1

JAYDEN "DUKE" SCOTT'S jersey number for the 2026 season. The junior running back, who previously wore No. 4, will don the Wolfpack's No. 1 jersey, which goes to a player who has impressed the coaching staff with his work habits and leadership.

Scott is getting set to take over as NC State's top running back after rushing for 595 yards and 4 touchdowns last season.

GRAPHIC COURTESY NC STATE FOOTBALL

"I'm just glad it ended the way it did. I'm not going to pretend there weren't people calling him, because I know there were. There's a lot of BS that goes on right now in college football. I'm just proud of him for sticking true to his values and where he wanted to be. I'm proud of our school for being able to step up and give him an offer that made it where it made sense."

— Dave Doeren on quarterback CJ Bailey's decision to stay out of the portal and return to NC State for his junior season

1,103

Total wins by baseball coach Elliott Avent, who retired in May at the conclusion of his 30th season with the Wolfpack. Avent is the winningest coach in NC State athletics history, regardless of sport.

4

Power Four schools whose current head football coach is also their all-time winningest coach. With 95 wins in 13 seasons at NC State, Dave Doeren is one of those coaches. The others are Iowa's Kirk Ferentz (209 wins), Clemson's Dabo Swinney (187) and Rutgers' Greg Schiano (99).

PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE ATHLETICS

15:54.39

EMILY WISNIEWSKI'S time in the 5,000-meter race at the USATF U20 Outdoor Championships on June 18 in Eugene, Ore. The NC State freshman, a native of nearby Corvallis, Ore., shaved more than 11 seconds off her personal best, finishing second to earn a place at the World Athletics U20 Championships, which will take place Aug. 5-9 in Eugene.

NACDA LEARFIELD DIRECTORS' CUP

6

Consecutive top-25 finishes for NC State in the Directors' Cup. Buoyed by the NCAA-title-winning women's cross country team and five other squads that finished in their respective top 10s, the Wolfpack came in 22nd in the all-sports competition with 860 points for the 2025-26 athletic year.

NC State finished sixth among ACC teams (with Notre Dame included). Texas won the competition with 1,322 points.

56th

Christian Hammond's spot on ESPN's list of the top 100 transfers in college basketball this year. The sophomore shooting guard, formerly of Santa Clara, is expected to team with Hofstra transfer Preston Edmead in the Pack's 2026-27 backcourt.

"Both are capable scorers and 3-point shooters who should work well alongside one another," ESPN's Jeff Borzello noted.

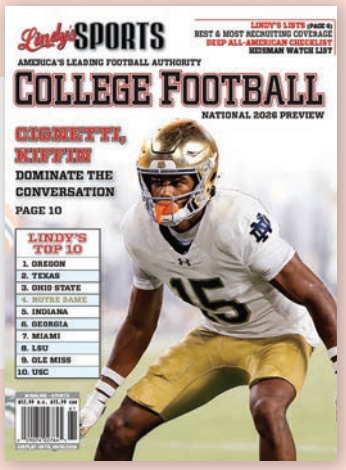
PHOTO COURTESY RIVALS.COM

"He's a Canadian who has been here a while, but he's probably more Southern now. ... He listens to country music and likes cowboy boots and stuff like that. He's a great kid that the whole NC State fan base will like. He's a nasty dude. He's the first guy you pick when you're in a fight."

— Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School coach Derek White on recent NC State commit **JACOB BURNS**, a three-star offensive lineman who attends high school in Georgia but is from Kingston, Ontario

"NC State hopes to take a step forward in a critical season for the program. Bailey looks ready to make the third-year jump under center, and the program's two second-year coordinators are ready to build off the momentum they enjoyed at the end of 2025. Look for a defense that flies around the field, with a high-tempo offense to complement it."

— Athlon Sports



"Even though there's not a long list of returning starters for the Wolfpack, there is some key continuity that could be a boost. NC State has both its coordinators from a year ago in place as well. Finishing last season on a three-game winning streak, including a bowl victory for the first time since 2017, provided momentum."

— Lindy's Sports

"The Wolfpack have too much work to do to make this the year that they finally post a double-digit win total. Unless Bailey emerges as a star, they might struggle to even go .500 in conference play."

— David Schoenholt, The Sporting News

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"The goal this year is to break thru and get to double digit wins (last time was 2002). QB Bailey should be one of the ACC's best, but the defense does have only 2 starters back from last year. The schedule ... is favorable as they avoid Miami, Clemson and SMU. I can paint a scenario where they are even or favored in their first 10 games, as they face the #60 schedule, and that could have them contending in the ACC."

— Phil Steele

IN FULL SWING

Golf Retreat Lets NC State Donors Get To Know The Coaches They Support

BY NOAH FLEISCHMAN

John Powers stood on the tee box of a par 3 with the idea of looking to make a birdie. He wasn't trying to impress his playing partner, who happened to be NC State football coach Dave Doeren, but his tee shot quickly did just that.

Powers put it close to the hole before making his putt with confidence to put a red number on his scorecard. Looking on, Doeren seemed to grow more enthused with each shot.

At that moment, Powers understood what it might be like to suit up for the Wolfpack's all-time winningest football coach with 95 victories to his credit through 13 seasons in Raleigh.

"I hit two really good shots in a row," Powers recalled. "He just got so excited. I could just see how you would want to play for him. He was just so excited that I made two good shots."

Powers' experience isn't uncommon at the Wolfpack Club's Red Wolf Society annual golf retreat. The two-day event, which took place this year at Ballyhack Golf Club in Roanoke, Va., provides an opportunity for donors to play golf with other members and coaches, while also getting closer with one another through fellowship and other non-golf-related activities.

For Powers, a longtime NC State supporter and current member of the alumni association's board of directors, the annual retreat has become a staple of his calendar. He has been in attendance the past three years, building bonds with other Wolfpack fans and coaches.

"What I really enjoyed was getting to know the coaches a little bit better," Powers said. "They all have great personalities and really care about the players, you can tell that. It's just fun to interact in a low-key environment, playing golf and having a couple of meals together."

Powers isn't alone in having that experience. The same can be said for E. John Poindexter, a 1990 NC State graduate who once drove for the Wolfpack's coaches caravan. He's been to each of the past five iterations of the event, which has also been held at Pinehurst in the recent past, and he keeps coming back based on the relationships he's crafted.

"I've made a lot of new friends," Poindexter said. "They've been faces that I've recognized for years, but now I'm getting to spend time and put faces with names while sitting around and talking and having a blast."

Poindexter has developed close relationships with several NC State football assistant coaches, including Charley Wiles and Joker Phillips, while also growing his pregame tailgate in the RV parking lot in front of the Murphy Center. Additionally, Poindexter has become friends with fellow Wolfpack fans, which has led to golf outings all over the country as a result of attending the retreat.

While Poindexter has grown his Rolodex throughout the years, the biggest impact the annual Red Wolf Society golf retreat has had on him has been by strengthening his involvement with the Wolfpack Club.

"I thought my days of giving to the Wolfpack Club were kind of over. I'm 60 and semi-retired. At some point,

A large contingent of NC State supporters attended the Red Wolf Society's recent golf retreat, which took place at the Ballyhack Golf Club in Roanoke, Va.
PHOPTO COURTESY WOLFPACK CLUB

Dave Doeren of the football team, shown here speaking to attendees, was one of the NC State coaches on hand for the golf retreat.

PHOTO COURTESY WOLFPACK CLUB

> **"I've made a lot of new friends. They've been faces that I've recognized for years, but now I'm getting to spend time and putting faces with names while sitting around and talking and having a blast."**
>
> E. John Poindexter on the Red Wolf Society's annual golf retreat

you quit," Poindexter said. "But seeing the coaches and these people that I've known but didn't really know until now has made me want to continue."

Poindexter's involvement with the athletics department will keep rolling. His ability to connect with the various coaches who make the trip to the retreat, from women's basketball coach Wes Moore to Doeren and everyone in between, has been extremely helpful in the changing landscape of college athletics.

"You get to see them as human beings instead of people that are making decisions for 18- to 21-year-olds and trying to win in a sport," Poindexter said. "So many people take it as negative things, but when you get to know these people, you realize they're out there doing absolutely the best and have the best at heart for the kids and the university."

That thought process seems to be a key reason why so many people continue to return to the retreat each year. The event helps attendees forge relationships with NC State's staff members and keeps those involved looking forward to each new event on the golf course.

It's especially true for Powers, who was able to have a memorable moment with Doeren in a competitive environment, while also getting to know him and the rest of the Wolfpack personnel in attendance on a deeper level.

"To me, sports is more than just wins and losses, and this really highlights that. I'm getting to know the athletics department staff and all of the coaches. They're really in it for more than just wins and losses, but to develop players," Powers said. "You get to see them and their personalities. They're great people. They're in it to help build character in their players, and you can see that is a really big thing for them." ■

FIGHTING SPIRIT

A Reinvigorated Dave Doeren Gets Set To Lead NC State Into The 2026 Season

BY NOAH FLEISCHMAN

Dave Doeren stood at midfield of Raymond James Stadium with a glowing smile under a Tampa night sky. He looked down and admired the loot — aptly designed as a pirate's chest filled with beaded necklaces and fake gold coins — that his NC State team earned after downing Memphis in the Gasparilla Bowl.

Doeren soaked in the moment following a 24-point win over one of the American Athletic Conference's top teams, but it had been a long road to this point. The Wolfpack had lost five consecutive postseason appearances, its most recent win coming in the 2017 Sun Bowl. There was also the up-and-down 2025 campaign in which the Pack dropped four of five games in the middle of the season before rallying to win four of the last five to earn eight wins for the eighth time in his first 13 years guiding the program.

That's not including defensive coordinator D.J. Eliot losing his daughter, Drue, to metastatic Ewing sarcoma last September, and the rumors of a possible retirement for Doeren at just 54 years old, which he quickly denied. In short, last fall could have been one of the tougher years for Doeren to manage.

But after enduring so much in the three-month span, the veteran head coach sat in the bowels of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers' home stadium with a greater sense of enjoyment in his job.

"It was a fun team to coach," Doeren said shortly after he walked off the field into the media room for his postgame press conference. "The season went by really fast, but these guys deserve a lot of credit for their

NC State Football Schedule

Date	Opponent	Time (TV)
Aug. 29	at Virginia	3:30 p.m. (ESPN)
Sept. 11	RICHMOND	7 p.m. (ESPNU)
Sept. 19	at Vanderbilt	12:45 p.m. (SECN)
Sept. 26	APPALACHIAN STATE	TBA
Oct. 3	LOUISVILLE	TBA
Oct. 10	WAKE FOREST	TBA
Oct. 23	at Stanford	10:30 p.m. (ESPN)
Oct. 31	CALIFORNIA	TBA
Nov. 7	DUKE	TBA
Nov. 14	SYRACUSE	TBA
Nov. 21	at Florida State	TBA
Nov. 28	at North Carolina	TBA

Dave Doeren is preparing for his 14th season at NC State. He's compiled a 95-70 overall record and 51-55 mark in ACC play.

PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE FOOTBALL

character, makeup and just how they listened. There are a lot of distractions these days for these kids. It says a lot about them with the way they feel about each other, the way they felt about our coaching staff and how they wanted to play the game."

Doeren was looked upon to lead the program through so much in a challenging year and believes it was one that brought out the most joy in his professional career in recent seasons.

It truly boiled down to one thing: The attitude of his team throughout the year.

"I think it's just the demeanor of the players. They were fun to coach," Doeren said in a recent interview with *The Wolfpacker*. "Obviously, everything didn't go well. We dealt with some serious adversity in the middle of the season with D.J.'s situation, but everyone just held together and supported each other."

That hadn't always been the case over the past few seasons, especially with the increasing popularity of the transfer portal and NIL. NC State had dealt with a handful of off-the-field matters, highlighted by starting quarterback MJ Morris sitting himself to redshirt after going 3-1 as the top signal-caller in the middle of the 2023 season.

Those instances took a toll on Dorean over time. The longtime coach, who got into the profession to help mentor the next generation of athletes, didn't appear to like where the sport was headed. But last season reinvigorated his love for his job after watching his group band together through the lowest points of the year.

"No one pointed fingers. You just didn't have the locker room drama that we've had over the years, stuff with certain players pouting on the sideline or kids wanting to opt out and redshirt in the middle of a winning streak," Doeren said. "Guys wanted to play, they wanted to get better, they wanted to win, they wanted to be coached, they were positive. It was refreshing as hell."

Although Doeren seemed to enjoy himself more last season than he did in years prior, the veteran leader did not let it change the way he operated on a day-to-day basis. Under contract with NC State through the 2029 campaign, he brought the same fiery approach to his job, based on what NC State offensive coordinator Kurt Roper observed.

Projected Depth Chart

Pos.	Name	Cl.	Ht.	Wt.
QB				
11	CJ Bailey	Jr.	6-6	213
10	Will Wilson	So.	6-1	230
RB				
1	Duke Scott	Jr.	5-10	225
7	Davion Gause	Jr.	5-11	212
TE				
19	Preston Douglas	So.	6-3	228
86	Hunter Provience	Sr.	6-5	245
WR X				
2	JoJo Trader	Jr.	6-1	190
5	Davion Dozier	Sr.	6-3	195
WR Z				
8	Keenan Jackson	Jr.	6-3	202
13	Tyran Warren	Sr.	6-3	180
WR I				
0	Victor Snow	Sr.	5-8	170
6	Ashton Locklear	Gr.	6-1	188
LT				
62	Jimarion McCrimmon	Sr.	6-5	295
74	Jai'Lun Hampton	Gr.	6-8	345
LG				
64	Rico Jackson	Sr.	6-6	322
79	Kamen Smith	Sr.	6-5	325
C				
50	Daniel Cruz	Jr.	6-2	315
55	Rylan Vann	Sr.	6-1	285
RG				
72	Spike Sowells Jr.	So.	6-2	312
71	Yousef Mugharbil	Gr.	6-5	322
RT				
54	Teague Andersen	Sr.	6-5	322
78	Trent Mitchell	Jr.	6-5	316

Pos.	Name	Cl.	Ht.	Wt.
DE				
13	Joseph Adedire	Sr.	6-3	260
92	Chase Bond	Jr.	6-4	265
NT				
55	Katron Evans	Gr.	6-3	336
90	Josiah Victor	So.	6-2	312
DT				
88	Isaiah Shirley	Sr.	6-3	280
99	AJ Prim	Sr.	6-2	287
JACK				
5	Harvey Dyson	Sr.	6-2	248
25	Sterling Dixon	Jr.	6-2	221
MIKE				
0	Popo Aguirre	Sr.	6-1	235
35	LaCorian Hodge	So.	6-2	217
WILL				
19	DaKaari Nelson	Sr.	6-3	232
15	AJ Richardson	Sr.	6-1	235
NIC				
22	Jackson Vick	Gr.	6-0	190
8	Isaiah Crowell	Gr.	5-11	185
CB				
7	Brian Nelson II	Sr.	6-0	197
28	Dy'Lan Johnson	So.	6-4	185
CB				
20	Ondre Evans	Jr.	6-0	187
10	Ty White	Jr.	5-10	176
SS				
4	King Mack	Sr.	5-10	195
3	Tristan Teasdell	So.	5-11	190
FS				
2	Ronnie Royal III	Jr.	5-9	185
6	Asaad Brown Jr.	Jr.	6-0	199

"He's the kind of guy that shows up and is the same every day. You appreciate that as an assistant coach. You know what you're going to get," Roper said.

"I'm glad he enjoyed himself. That's why we all get into this, because we have a passion and love for this game. We had such good kids last year; they were a lot of fun to be around. These guys this season seem to be a lot like that."

With the 2026 season rapidly approaching, Doeren is ready for another opportunity to continue stacking victories as the program's all-time winningest coach. The goal is to compete for an ACC championship, a crown that the Wolfpack hasn't claimed since 1979.

Last season reset the tone for what Doeren is looking for with his team. The results might not have been perfect, but the response from his program was what seemed to enlighten him the most.

Now, it's a matter of building from that growing point, looking to play deep into the postseason with a chance to make the 12-team College Football Playoff by competing for the conference title. Junior quarterback CJ Bailey is back to lead the offense for the third consecutive season, while a retooled defense is ready to excel in the second year in Eliot's new scheme — a combination that could set the team up for success without conference heavyweights Clemson, Miami or SMU on the schedule.

But there's still a month's worth of fall camp and 12 games to focus on first. For Doeren, who was eager to escape the Murphy Center for a much-needed summer vacation, his affection for the sport he's spent his entire life in will be at one of its highest levels when NC State hits the field once again to prepare for a critical season ahead.

"You get to a certain point on the calendar as a coach and it's time to check out," he said. "But when camp begins I'm going to feel really good and ready to go." ■

BY NOAH FLEISCHMAN

In the days leading up to NC State's trip to the Gasparilla Bowl last December, quarterback CJ Bailey wasn't sure what his future held. He was asked point blank whether he would consider entering the transfer portal after the season, but at the time, he didn't know.

What he did know was that he wanted to go home to Miami to decompress after the Wolfpack wrapped up its 2025 campaign. Back in the comfortable surroundings of the city where he had grown up, he would have a chance to talk with his parents and weigh his options.

A SHOT IN THE ARM

Back For His Junior Season, CJ Bailey Looks To Elevate NC State's Offense

Bailey's noncommittal answer left some Wolfpack fans feeling nervous. Would the program's homegrown star look to go somewhere else, just as predecessors Devin Leary and Russell Wilson had done years earlier? A sense of deja vu emerged on social media with pundits weighing in.

But those fears were quickly extinguished. Exactly two weeks later, on the first day of the college football transfer portal opening, Bailey made his intentions clear. He posted a simple graphic on social media with four words emblazoned on it: "Back with the Pack."

For Bailey, who finished with a career-best 3,105 passing yards and 31 total touchdowns in 2025, returning to NC State for his junior campaign was a matter of following his heart.

"That decision took a little while to come out, but I already had my mind set," he said this spring. "I wanted to come back to NC State. Of course there was more stuff to it with the decision-making, but in my heart, I already knew I wanted to be at NC State."

Not only did NC State have Bailey's heart, but it also was the place that he felt was best equipped to help him make another jump in his production heading into his third year as a starter.

Retention Efforts

Head coach Dave Doeren said there were two facets to the quarterback's reasoning. First, NC State is the program Bailey believed in when Doeren and offensive coordinator Kurt Roper began recruiting him out of Chaminade-Madonna Prep in Hollywood, Fla. Other schools were infatuated with the Lions' star-studded wide receiver corps, but NC State was interested in Bailey, and that interest was mutual.

Second, in today's age of college athletics, the paycheck had to make sense.

In the end, the Wolfpack did everything in its power to retain its quarterback.

"I knew that he came here for several reasons, and one of them was to leave this place in a better spot than it was when

Bailey's 3,105 passing yards last season ranked fifth in the ACC, while his 25 touchdown passes were fourth in the conference.
PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE ATHLETICS

he got here. We haven't done that yet," Doeren said. "The NIL stuff matters, and we were able to get to a very competitive level, which allowed him to be at peace. He wanted to stay and had teammates who he wanted to play with. It was a win-win. It was great for them and great for us."

Even though Bailey's affection for the program weighed heavily in his decision, that doesn't mean other programs didn't try to use third-party connections to gauge his interest in leaving. He wasn't in the portal, but Doeren isn't naïve about the kind of attention players receive even when they aren't looking around.

"I'm not going to pretend there weren't people calling him, because I know that there were," Doeren said. "There's a lot of BS that goes on right now in college football. I'm just proud of him for sticking true to his values and where he wanted to be. I'm proud of our school for being able to step up and give him an offer that made sense."

> **"That decision took a little while to come out, but I already had my mind set. I wanted to come back to NC State."**
> Bailey

Room For Growth

Bailey made strides as a leader last season, wearing the "C" on the left shoulder of his NC State uniform with pride as the youngest captain in Doeren's first 13 seasons with the program. He worked to find his voice, picking his spots to speak up within the unit. And he wasn't afraid to say something to an older player, if needed, conversations that tended to be taken well by those on the receiving end.

At the end of the day, the goal was to win. Bailey's leadership was going to be a key part of that effort, and it showed last season, with the Wolfpack rallying to win four of its last five games.

Now that he's more comfortable running the offense, NC State has a new set of goals it wants Bailey to work toward going into his third season as the starter.

Roper wants him to continue refining his understanding of defenses. The Pack is looking for Bailey to grow more comfortable identifying what the other unit on the field seeks to do on a given snap.

"It's a process to learn how to play quarterback at this level," Roper said. "The process that you never stop is understanding defenses. The more you understand defenses, the better your plan can be before you ever snap the football. You can use all the film study that you have to apply to your decision-making on game day."

Bailey was able to take a step forward in that area last season, a byproduct of starting all 13 games for the first time while also putting in effort in the meeting room. He was able to see improvement as the year progressed, including four 300-yard passing performances.

Another priority is to develop consistency. The staff wants Bailey to be as comfortable under the prime-time lights as he is in games that get less attention.

"He's had a lot of great games for us, and there have been a few where I know he wishes he had played better," Doeren said. "Some of that is the guys around him needing to play better as well, but I'd love to see him be consistent in some of these big games."

The 2025 season provided a glimpse into Doeren's assessment. Bailey rose to the occasion against No. 8 Georgia Tech, throwing for 340 yards and 2 touchdowns with a 75 percent completion rate. But he fell flat at No. 16 Notre Dame (17-of-30 passing, 186 yards, 1 touchdown, 3 interceptions) and at No. 16 Miami (17-of-30 passing, 120 yards, 2 interceptions).

Bailey has what it takes to play well in big moments; the Georgia Tech victory proved that. NC State just wants to see that version of its starting quarterback more often. Bailey is 10-3 as a starter when he doesn't throw an interception, but he's 2-9 when he tosses one or more picks.

Doeren said he thinks the quarterback might have put too much pressure on himself in some games.

"Sometimes you get into those environments and you want to be different than you normally are," Doeren said. "He just needs to be himself. He's a special kid, he's a special player. Just go out there and play and have fun." ■

EXPERIENCE MATTERS

BY NOAH FLEISCHMAN

NC State had become accustomed to cycling through quarterbacks in recent seasons. The Wolfpack, at one point, deployed eight different signal-callers in a four-year span from 2021 to 2024.

But with junior CJ Bailey at the helm of the offense, NC State has found some stability under center. Last fall, he became the first Wolfpack quarterback to start all 13 games in a season since Devin Leary did so in 2021.

NC State was able to retain Bailey this offseason, and the staff knows exactly what it will get from the most important position on the offense going into the 2026 season.

The Miami native threw for 3,105 yards, with 25 touchdowns and 9 interceptions, and he added another 215 yards and 6 scores on 89 rushing attempts as a sophomore. He did so in a new offensive scheme under coordinator Kurt Roper, building on a quality freshman year.

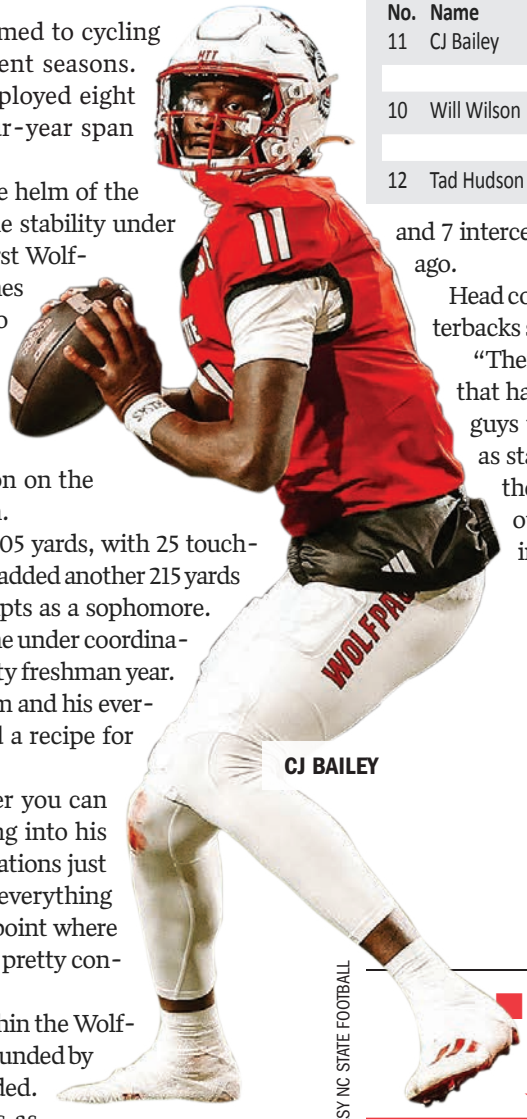
Bailey's knowledge of the system and his ever-growing confidence have created a recipe for success going forward.

"Experience is the best teacher you can have," Roper said. "With CJ going into his third year of starting, the conversations just flow so much easier. He can see everything in his mind's eye, and he's to the point where we're speaking the same language pretty consistently."

While Bailey is comfortable within the Wolfpack's pro-style offense, he's surrounded by experience in case a backup is needed. Sophomore Will Wilson returns as the primary backup after rushing for 146 yards and a team-best 10 touchdowns on 43 attempts as the go-to short-yardage rusher last season. In addition, senior Tad Hudson, arrived this spring after throwing for 1,253 yards, with 6 touchdowns and 7 interceptions, in seven starts at Coastal Carolina a year ago.

Head coach Dave Doeren is excited about where the quarterbacks stand heading into the 2026 season.

"There isn't a good team from Pop Warner to the NFL that has a bad quarterback on the field. It's nice to have guys that have been out there and had to win games as starters," Doeren said. "They're all three good kids, they're competitive, they're good teammates to each other. I love the fact we've got depth and experience in that room."



CJ BAILEY

PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE FOOTBALL

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

No.	Name	Cl.	Ht.	Wt.	Hometown
STARTER					
11	CJ Bailey	Jr.	6-6	213	Miami, Fla.
BACKUP					
10	Will Wilson	So.	6-1	230	Columbia, S.C.
WAITING IN THE WINGS					
12	Tad Hudson	Sr.	6-3	227	Huntersville, N.C.

BY THE NUMBERS

10 The number of rushing touchdowns Will Wilson accounted for in his freshman campaign. He is tied for the most returning rushing touchdowns among all ACC players entering the fall.

35-0 CJ Bailey's red zone touchdown-to-interception ratio through his first two seasons.

68.9 Bailey's completion percentage during the 2025 season, the second-best single-season mark in program history, trailing only Philip Rivers' 72.1 percent in 2003.

POSITIONAL GRADES

★★★★ Among country's best;
★★★ Among ACC's best;
★★ Solid or has potential; ★ Too unproven

STARTER ★★★ ½

CJ Bailey was thrown into the fire as a freshman, starting 10 games in place of an injured Grayson McCall. He built on that experience as a sophomore, finding ways to push the ball downfield more often, which led to growth in all areas of his game. If he continues his upward trajectory, Bailey has the potential to be one of the premier quarterbacks in all of college football — not just the ACC.

EXPERIENCE ★★★

NC State doesn't have an issue in this department. Bailey started 22 games in his first two seasons of college football, while Will Wilson played in 11 games as the team's go-to short-yardage rusher. In addition, Tad Hudson made seven starts at Coastal Carolina last fall.

DEPTH ★★★

By starting every game last year, Bailey gave NC State some much-needed continuity after a few seasons of frequent disruption. The Wolfpack would like to keep that trend going, but if it has to turn to Wilson, the staff is confident he can get the job done.

OVERALL GRADE ★★★

NC State was pleased with Bailey's improvement as a sophomore, and the staff believes he can make a similar leap as a junior. The offense may go as far as he can take it, especially in the big games on the schedule, but he's ready to prove that he belongs in the conversation as one of the top passers in the nation.

SPOTLIGHT PLAYER

JUNIOR CJ BAILEY

Bailey enters his third season running NC State's offense. The experience he's gained has not only made him a more confident player, but has put him in position to take another step in his development under offensive coordinator Kurt Roper.

"When a guy is in his third year, you just keep making jumps," Roper said. "You always try to speak the same language with somebody. It takes time to get that, and that's happening more and more with us."

Bailey has continued to build a tight-knit relationship with his position coach and play-caller. It's one of the reasons why he and Roper are eager for the 2026 campaign to arrive.

"I can see what he's seeing, and he can see what I'm seeing," Bailey said. "That's why practice flows so well — we're both seeing the same thing."

TALENTED TANDEM LEADS THE BACKFIELD

BY DAVID ALLEN

A season ago, one of the central questions facing NC State's offense was how Hollywood Smothers would replace the production of Jordan Waters and Kendrick Raphael. Now, with the first-team All-ACC performer having transferred to Texas, the Wolfpack faces a similar dilemma.

Smothers' exit has thrust Jayden "Duke" Scott into a starting role. The junior made the most of his opportunities last season playing behind Smothers, rushing for 581 yards and 4 touchdowns. In the three games in which Scott had 10 or more carries, he racked up 379 rushing yards, with an average of 7.2 yards per attempt.

Even when he wasn't pacing the backfield, the 5-foot-10, 225-pound Scott was efficient with his touches. His full-season average of 5.5 yards per carry was fifth best in the ACC among players with more than 100 rushing attempts.

Head coach Dave Doeren said the next step for Scott is to become a leader in the Wolfpack's locker room.

"The challenge I've given to Duke is to take his voice to another level with his teammates," Doeren said, "and to be able to utilize the platform he's created with his work ethic, with his talent and with his production on the field."

That challenge was accepted by Scott this offseason. He will wear the No. 1 jersey in 2026, an honor the coaching staff bestows on the player "who exhibits an elite work ethic … while also serving as an exemplary leader."

Doeren went into the transfer portal to find a dynamic option to complement Scott in the backfield, landing Davion Gause from archrival North Carolina. The 5-11, 212-pound junior was part of the Tar Heels' running back committee for two seasons, amassing 585 yards and 7 touchdowns. Gause was a high school teammate of junior quarterback CJ Bailey and can serve as a receiving threat, too, having caught 20 passes for 177 yards and 2 touchdowns at UNC.

Behind Scott and Gause, the Pack has a high-upside option in junior Jonathan Paylor. NC State used Paylor as a wide receiver his freshman year, then moved him to the backfield last summer before a knee injury ended his sophomore campaign before it began. He'll be back in action this year and is set to resume his career at running back.

"The ball-carrier part of his game was why we moved him to running back," Doeren said. "Just watching him as a receiver and watching him as a running back, he's a lot more explosive at running back. He can run. You get him on a wheel route or a vertical route on a linebacker and you've got a nice mismatch there."

DUKE SCOTT

PHOTO BY LARRY BLANKENSHIP

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

No.	Name	Cl.	Ht.	Wt.	Hometown
	STARTER				
1	Jayden "Duke" Scott	Jr.	5-10	225	Stockbridge, Ga.
	BACKUPS				
7	Davion Gause	Jr.	5-11	212	Opa-Locka, Fla.
20	Deandre Desinor	So.	5-10	183	Delray Beach, Fla.
14	Jonathan Paylor	Jr.	5-9	182	Burlington, N.C.
	WAITING IN THE WINGS				
29	RJ Boyd	Fr.	5-10	215	Waycross, Ga.
25	Darius Johnson	Sr.	5-10	205	Hendersonville, Tenn.
26	Isiah Jones	Jr.	5-8	200	Rolesville, N.C.
24	Dylan McCoy	Fr.	5-8	197	Grayson, Ga.
34	Noah Moss	Fr.	6-0	200	Daphne, Ala.

BY THE NUMBERS

207 All-purpose yards by Duke Scott in the Wolfpack's 48-36 victory over No. 8 Georgia Tech last November.

76 Touchdowns scored by three-star freshman Noah Moss during his career at St. Michael Catholic in Fairhope, Ala., including 37 his senior season alone.

14.1 Jonathan Paylor's average yards per attempt as a senior at Cummings High in Burlington, N.C., his last full season of action.

POSITIONAL GRADES

★★★★ Among country's best;
★★★ Among ACC's best;
★★ Solid or has potential; ★ Too unproven

STARTER ★★★

Much like Hollywood Smothers in 2024, Duke Scott's breakout at the end of the 2025 season should give the Wolfpack confidence that the junior can handle an increased workload and lead the ground attack.

EXPERIENCE ★★

Aside from Scott and Davion Gause, the only running backs on the roster who have carried the ball at the collegiate level are Darius Johnson and Jonathan Paylor. Between them, Johnson and Paylor have 4 career rushing attempts.

DEPTH ★★★

If he's healthy, the speedy Paylor can serve as a fresh option behind the 1-2 punch of Scott and Gause. He has the potential to bring another dimension to the Wolfpack backfield.

OVERALL GRADE ★★★

If Scott proves he can maintain his efficiency with an increased workload, and if Gause steps in as an effective change-of-pace option, the Wolfpack running game has the potential to take a step forward in 2026, even with Smothers no longer in the picture.

SPOTLIGHT PLAYER

JUNIOR DAVION GAUSE

Dave Doeren wants junior quarterback CJ Bailey to be as comfortable as possible under center, and the arrival of Gause should help. Gause and Bailey go way back. They share high school football roots from their days growing up in South Florida. As seniors at Chaminade-Madonna in Hollywood, Fla., the pair were a key part in an undefeated, state championship-winning season. Gause, a Rivals four-star prospect, showed flashes during his time at North Carolina, ranking as the team's third-leading rusher last year with 259 yards.

SOMETHING TO PROVE

BY NOAH FLEISCHMAN

There's just a different feeling when a position group has something to prove. Practices have a unique vibe, with each player looking to make an impact, and games are opportunities to put everything on full display.

That's exactly what NC State's wide receivers room is dealing with heading into the 2026 season. Faced with the challenge of replacing last season's top four route runners, the staff brought in five transfers and four true freshmen.

Miami transfer JoJo Trader, the former No. 44 overall recruit in the 2024 cycle, headlined NC State's offseason work at wide receiver. He was sparingly used by the Hurricanes, recording 19 receptions for 269 yards and 2 touchdowns over the past two years, but has a built-in relationship with Wolfpack quarterback CJ Bailey after they spent three high school seasons together.

In addition to Trader, NC State landed Miami transfer Chance Robinson via the portal. He didn't record a catch in his first two collegiate seasons due to a redshirt and an injury, but Robinson grew up with Bailey and Trader as a part of the Miami Gardens Ravens youth program.

In addition to the former Hurricanes, NC State acquired slot receiver Victor Snow (Buffalo), and big-play threats Davion Dozier (Appalachian State) and Tyran Warren (Alcorn State). Snow, a fifth-year senior, is coming off a 2025 season in which he amassed career-best 815 yards and 8 scores on 62 catches.

NC State's returnees will also have a chance to play expanded roles. Junior Keenan Jackson, the team's top returning receiver with 281 yards and 2 scores last season, has the chance to become more of a focal point, while sophomore Je'rel Bolder is looking for his first taste of consistent action on offense.

NC State's freshmen class will also lend a hand. Four-star prospects Amiri Acker and Tyreek Copper headline the class, with the latter having totaled 105 receptions for 2,242 yards and 33 touchdowns as a senior at Kinston (N.C.) High.

The wideouts room has undergone big changes, but coach Dave Doeren is comfortable with the group his staff has assembled.

"These guys produced in the spring," he said. "They were competitive, they were consistent, they learned the offense, they're fun to be around. A lot of them are guys that are trying to prove themselves at this level, and there's a nice chip on their shoulder too."

SPOTLIGHT PLAYER

JUNIOR KEENAN JACKSON

Jackson found his way onto the field as a true freshman two seasons ago thanks to his standout blocking skills. He earned the coaching staff's trust with his effort-based play, which made him NC State's most-used wideout, in terms of snaps, with 604 as a sophomore last fall.

Now, he's looking to break through as a pass catcher in his critical junior season. Jackson has recorded 40 receptions for 405 yards and 4 touchdowns to this point in his collegiate career, setting the stage for a quality third campaign.

Offensive coordinator Kurt Roper expects a breakout season from Jackson.

"He's got great size, great hands, and he understands the game at a high level," Roper said. "He's going to be a big-time playmaker for us."

KEENAN JACKSON

PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE FOOTBALL

BY THE NUMBERS

2 Number of state single-season records Tyreek Copper set as a senior at Kinston (N.C.) High. He accounted for 2,242 yards to shatter Sage Surratt's 2016 record (2,104) and also reeled in 33 scores to edge Mohamed Massaquoi's 2004 mark (32).

67.9 Percent of NC State's receiving yards that the wideouts accounted for last season.

2,131 Yards that CJ Bailey and JoJo Trader combined to produce in their three seasons as a pass-catch combo at Chaminade-Madonna Prep in Hollywood, Fla.

POSITIONAL GRADES

★★★★ Among country's best;
★★★ Among ACC's best;
★★ Solid or has potential; ★ Too unproven

STARTERS ★★

Keenan Jackson is the only returning starter at wide receiver, leaving the door open for others to earn starting spots alongside him. At this point, it appears JoJo Trader and Victor Snow are likely to slot into those roles, though the reserves will also see plenty of action.

EXPERIENCE ★★

NC State built a quality group of players based on age, meshing seniors well with underclassmen. But the three incoming veterans are looking to prove themselves at the power-conference level after impressing in the Group of Five and FCS ranks last season.

DEPTH ★★½

Joker Phillips knows how to recruit at a high level. His room required an extensive rebuild this offseason, but he was able to use the portal and high school ranks to his advantage.

OVERALL GRADE: ★★

NC State's offense needs weapons for CJ Bailey to be successful at quarterback. The retooled wide receiving corps has the potential to provide that for the junior signal-caller.

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

No.	Name	Cl.	Ht.	Wt.	Hometown
STARTERS					
2	Joshisa "JoJo" Trader	Jr.	6-1	190	Hollywood, Fla.
8	Keenan Jackson	Jr.	6-3	202	Waxhaw, N.C.
0	Victor Snow	5th	5-8	170	Webster, N.Y.
BACKUPS					
13	Tyran Warren	Sr.	6-3	180	Picayune, Miss.
5	Davion Dozier	Sr.	6-3	195	Moody, Ala.
82	Chance Robinson	Jr.	6-2	205	Fort Lauderdale, Fla.
6	Ashton Locklear	Gr.	6-1	188	Apex, N.C.
WAITING IN THE WINGS					
21	Je'rel Bolder	So.	6-0	212	Wingate, N.C.
83	Amiri Acker	Fr.	6-2	190	Iva, S.C.
85	Tyreek Copper	Fr.	6-1	185	Kinston, N.C.
22	Aiden Smalls	Fr.	5-11	183	Clayton, N.C.
89	Jai Richburg	Fr.	6-2	190	Winston-Salem, N.C.

STARTING OVER

BY DAVID ALLEN

With Justin Joly, Cody Hardy and Dante Daniels off to the professional ranks, NC State head coach Dave Doeren will have to rely on several new targets to replace the outgoing production at the tight end position. Joly paced the Wolfpack in receptions (49) and receiving touchdowns (7) on his way to an All-ACC season and a spot in the fifth round of the NFL Draft, where he was chosen by the Denver Broncos.

Earlier this summer, Doeren conceded that the tight end position is "probably the biggest question mark — not because of talent, but because 100 percent of our snaps last year are gone at that position."

The contenders to step up for the Wolfpack include returning sophomore Preston Douglas and a couple of transfers.

Douglas turned heads during spring practice and emerged as the top option to replace Joly in the passing game. The 6-foot-3, 228-pounder was buried behind more-experienced teammates on last year's depth chart but now is primed to be a featured player in offensive coordinator Kurt Roper's attack. While he caught only 1 pass — an 18-yarder against Memphis in the Gasparilla Bowl — he contributed on special teams while awaiting his chance to be a bigger part of the offensive game plan. His highlight came when he gained 2 yards on a fake punt against North Carolina, picking up a first down on what would turn out to be a touchdown drive for the Wolfpack.

HUNTER PROVIENCE

PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE FOOTBALL

"Douglas got to play in our bowl game, and he was good on special teams toward the end of the year," Doeren said. "He had a good spring."

Seeking additional help, NC State dipped into the transfer portal and landed former four-star recruit Vander Ploog from Oregon. Listed by On3 as the No. 18 tight end in the portal this year, Ploog did not see action as a true freshman with the Ducks. Before arriving in Eugene, he was a a prep standout at Troy High in Fullerton, Calif., racking up 1,148 yards and 17 touchdowns as a senior.

Another transfer portal find for the Wolfpack was 6-5, 245-pound Hunter Provience from Montana State. The senior tallied 11 catches for 131 yards and a score on his way to winning an FCS national title with the Bobcats.

Ian Flynt and Gus Ritchey are two players who could make an impact. Flynt is a junior who transferred from Nebraska in 2025 and took snaps in two games for the Pack last season. Ritchey is a former Cary (N.C.) High standout who totaled 2,100 yards and 22 touchdowns in his prep career. Both will be expected to provide depth this fall.

"There's competition, there's new faces," Doeren said. "But now we've got to get these guys on the field and get them going."

SPOTLIGHT PLAYER

SENIOR HUNTER PROVIENCE

Provience is making the leap from the FCS level to the Power Four, having played previously at Montana State. But at 6-foot-5, 245 pounds, he's got the size NC State is looking for, and he brings impressive credentials as a blocker.

During the Bobcats' FCS championship season in 2025, Provience was used as a run blocker on 225 of his 356 total offensive snaps, earning a 65.3 grade from Pro Football Focus. His run-blocking marks from PFF were over 65.0 in all three of his collegiate seasons, headlined by a 70.3 mark as a sophomore.

BY THE NUMBERS

37 Touchdown receptions by Vander Ploog during his career at Troy High in Fullerton, Calif.

43 Yards gained by Hunter Provience on his season-long catch last year, a touchdown strike in Montana State's 57-3 victory over Eastern Washington.

62 Combined receptions by tight ends Justin Joly, Dante Daniels and Cody Hardy last season, totaling 22.1 percent of the Wolfpack's 280 catches as a team.

POSITIONAL GRADES

★★★★ Among country's best;
★★★ Among ACC's best;
★★ Solid or has potential; ★ Too unproven

STARTER ★½

NC State just doesn't have any proven players at this position group. Preston Douglas and Vander Ploog appear to be the top candidates for the starting job, but they've got 1 career catch between them.

EXPERIENCE ★

Hunter Provience is the only tight end on the roster with more than a handful of offensive snaps, and his experience to date has all been at the FCS level.

DEPTH ★★

With seven scholarship tight ends on the roster, the Pack has options here, even if it lacks experience. The addition of Ploog and Provience via the portal addressed a critical need.

OVERALL GRADE ★½

Dave Doeren said it himself: This is probably the Wolfpack's biggest question mark going into the season. Douglas and Ploog could both emerge as reliable options for junior quarterback CJ Bailey in the passing game. But for now, at least, we're talking about potential.

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

No.	Name	Cl.	Ht.	Wt.	Hometown
	STARTER				
19	Preston Douglas	So.	6-3	228	Jupiter, Fla.
	BACKUPS				
87	Ian Flynt	Jr.	6-4	265	Katy, Texas
88	Vander Ploog	So.	6-6	230	Fullerton, Calif.
86	Hunter Provience	Sr.	6-5	245	San Diego
44	Gus Ritchey	So.	6-2	235	Pittsboro, N.C.
	WAITING IN THE WINGS				
84	Stephen Brown	Fr.	6-6	200	Chicago
45	Tex Vaughn	Fr.	6-2	231	Kings Mountain, N.C.

DEPTH IS A STRENGTH

BY NOAH FLEISCHMAN

NC State coach Dave Doeren didn't hesitate when asked about the Wolfpack's offensive line going into the 2026 season. The group, which has a handful of new faces mixed in with several critical returnees, quickly brought confidence to his voice.

"I'm excited about our O-line," Doeren said. "It's the most depth we've had since I've been here."

The Pack lost three starters from last year's unit, but the team has multiple options at all five spots, a luxury it has been building toward the past few years in the recruiting process.

A pair of returning starters — fifth-year senior right tackle Teague Andersen and sophomore right guard Spike Sowells Jr. — headline the group. Elsewhere, NC State used the transfer portal to land senior tackle Jimarion McCrimon from East Carolina and junior center/guard Daniel Cruz from Texas. Both are instant-impact additions.

McCrimon will likely step in as the starting left tackle. He allowed only 6 quarterback pressures in the last eight games of the 2025 season, a hopeful sign that he's ready to protect CJ Bailey's blind side. Andersen started 12 games at right tackle last fall and will remain in that role.

At the interior positions, expect some heated battles in preseason camp. Cruz and Sowells are both capable of playing center and guard and could be interchangeable. In addition, NC State expects seniors Rico Jackson and Kamen Smith and graduate Yousef Mugharbil to push for playing time at guard.

Entering the 2026 season, NC State has a promising group that collectively has made 79 starts at the college level.

"I always say the offensive line is the engine of the offense," coordinator Kurt Roper said. "I think they're going to be fun to watch."

Not only does the depth provide quality backups in case of injury, it also has created a competitive environment, which is exactly how Doeren likes it.

"I'm happy that [offensive line coach Garett] Tujague has that, because for a while, we didn't," Doeren said. "Guys could have a bad day, and there wasn't anyone behind them that could take their job. That's not the way it is right now."

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

No.	Pos.	Name	Cl.	Ht.	Wt.	Hometown
STARTERS						
62	LT	Jimarion McCrimon	Sr.	6-5	295	Kissimmee, Fla.
64	LG	Rico Jackson	Sr.	6-6	322	Fort Lauderdale, Fla.
50	C	Daniel Cruz	Jr.	6-2	315	N. Richland Hills, Texas
72	RG	Spike Sowells Jr.	So.	6-2	312	Louisville, Ky.
54	RT	Teague Andersen	5th	6-5	322	Lehi, Utah
RESERVES						
74		Jai'lun Hampton	Gr.	6-8	345	Detroit
78		Trent Mitchell	Jr.	6-5	316	Gastonia, N.C.
71		Yousef Mugharbil	Gr.	6-5	322	Murphy, N.C.
79		Kamen Smith	Sr.	6-5	325	Wilkesboro, N.C.
55		Rylan Vann	5th	6-1	285	Cary, N.C.
WAITING IN THE WINGS						
75		Tre Aiken	Fr.	6-3	310	Clinton, S.C.
76		Michael Gibbs	So.	6-4	303	Wilmington, N.C.
52		Kage Payne	So.	6-2	290	Cincinnati
73		Brady Sakowitz	Fr.	6-6	328	Richmond, Va.
70		TK Whitset	So.	6-4	300	Antioch, Tenn.

BY THE NUMBERS

9 Number of quarterback pressures Spike Sowells Jr. allowed in 207 pass-blocking opportunities at guard during his freshman season.

183 Where Texas transfer Daniel Cruz ranked nationally in the 2024 recruiting cycle, per Rivals, as a four-star prospect out of Richland High in North Richland Hills, Texas.

1,482 Snaps played by Jimarion McCrimon at either right or left tackle the previous two seasons at East Carolina.

SPOTLIGHT PLAYER

SENIOR LEFT TACKLE JIMARION MCCRIMON

NC State worked quickly after Jacarrius Peak transferred to South Carolina, landing McCrimon out of the portal. McCrimon started at right tackle for East Carolina in 2024 and moved to the left side last fall. He earned first-team All-American Athletic Conference honors at the latter position, a performance that caught NC State's eye.

McCrimon continued his upward trajectory this spring. He established himself as the Pack's top left tackle, while also making a significant impact as a veteran leader.

"He's the right kind of guy," offensive coordinator Kurt Roper said. "He's going to be a leader of that group. ... He's going to come with his lunch pail and hard hat every day and go to work."

TEAGUE ANDERSEN

PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE FOOTBALL

POSITIONAL GRADES

★★★★ Among country's best;
★★★ Among ACC's best;
★★ Solid or has potential; ★ Too unproven

STARTERS ★★★

NC State has confidence in its five top offensive linemen. Tackles Teague Andersen and Jimarion McCrimon have excelled at the collegiate level, while the interior positions are full of talent, notably former four-star recruits Daniel Cruz and Spike Sowells Jr.

EXPERIENCE ★★½

Both of the Pack's first-team tackles have multiple years of starting experience. The interior positions are more green, but Sowells did start six games as a freshman. Rico Jackson, Kamen Smith and Yousef Mugharbil all played last season and will be asked to take on bigger roles this fall.

DEPTH ★★½

NC State was forced to play inexperienced offensive linemen the past few seasons. That's never ideal, but the upside is that the Pack goes into its 2026 campaign with real depth. The staff is confident in the entire position group, not just the starting five.

OVERALL GRADE ★★★

The coaching staff is excited about this unit's potential. The line will be critical to the success of the entire offense, whether that's protecting CJ Bailey or helping establish the run.

ISAIAH SHIRLEY

PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE FOOTBALL

NEW-LOOK FRONT COMES TOGETHER

BY NOAH FLEISCHMAN

After relying on veterans Sabastian Harsh, Brandon Cleveland and Travali Price last fall, NC State is set to deploy a new-look front in 2026.

The Wolfpack's departed trio, all of whom exhausted their eligibility after last season, have left three critical roles open for the taking. The most intriguing of those positions is the nose guard spot, where there's still a lot to be decided.

"It was occupied by Brandon Cleveland for a long time, so there are some new faces in there that aren't very experienced," coach Dave Doeren said. "They're talented, and they're great kids."

Marshall transfer Katron Evans, who is awaiting an NCAA waiver to be eligible for this season, is the headliner at Cleveland's former spot, but sophomore Josiah Victor is also expected to play a key role at the position. Additionally, sophomore Omarian Abraham and true freshman Carmelo McKenzie provide depth for the Pack against opposing centers.

But, as Doeren noted, this group isn't long on experience. The four have combined for 609 total collegiate snaps, with Evans supplying 478. Now a graduate student, he previously spent time at Jackson State, Charlotte and Marshall, totaling 34 tackles, including 5.5 for loss and 1.5 sacks, during his college career.

While the nose guard position has a sense of uncertainty about it, NC State is excited about what it has at its defensive tackle and end spots in the three-man front.

At defensive tackle, senior Isaiah Shirley has generated a lot of buzz this summer. He served as a rotational defender last season, posting 15 tackles and an interception that he returned for a touchdown versus Wake Forest.

Shirley is likely to step into the starting role to begin the season, and NC State also has high hopes for its backups at the position — former junior college transfer AJ Prim and sophomore Colby Cronk.

On the opposite side of the line, the Wolfpack likes how former Texas Tech transfer Joseph Adedire has looked this offseason. He has a chance to earn the starting defensive end spot, but junior Chase Bond has made a push with his own improved play. Both Adedire and Bond are expected to see significant action.

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

No.	Name	Cl.	Ht.	Wt.	Hometown
	STARTERS				
13	Joseph Adedire	5th	6-3	260	Arlington, Texas
55	Katron Evans	Gr.	6-3	336	Norfolk, Va.
88	Isaiah Shirley	Sr.	6-3	280	Boone, N.C.
	BACKUPS				
92	Chase Bond	Jr.	6-4	265	Massillon, Ohio
47	Adrian Farrow	So.	6-4	265	Miami, Fla.
99	AJ Prim	Sr.	6-2	287	Foley, Ala.
90	Josiah Victor	So.	6-2	312	Loganville, Ga.
	WAITING IN THE WINGS				
56	Omarian Abraham	So.	6-1	297	Fort Lauderdale, Fla.
34	Colby Cronk	So.	6-3	270	Palm Coast, Fla.
93	Carmelo McKenzie	Fr.	6-1	313	York, Pa.

POSITIONAL GRADES

★★★★ Among country's best;
★★★ Among ACC's best;
★★ Solid or has potential; ★ Too unproven

STARTERS ★★

Katron Evans has the most experience at nose guard, so the NCAA's decision on his eligibility waiver will affect the team's depth at the position. Joseph Adedire and Isaiah Shirley are eager to carve out starting roles after impressing as backups last season.

EXPERIENCE ★★

NC State's two-deep is young and doesn't boast a lot of experience, but most of the players who will see action have been featured at some point in their careers. There is a quality mix of seniors/graduates and underclassmen.

DEPTH ★★

The Wolfpack has seven players who have played collegiately on the defensive line before, creating an opportunity for different faces to work their way into the lineup. NC State will likely rotate through the two-deep since it likes the impact the reserves can provide in small doses.

OVERALL GRADE ★★

NC State is getting set for its second year in D.J. Eliot's system. That should provide continuity for the returning players in the rotation.

SPOTLIGHT PLAYER

GRADUATE NOSE GUARD KATRON EVANS

Evans needs an NCAA waiver to play a sixth season, but NC State was confident as of early July it would be approved. Coach Dave Doeren called the case a "no-brainer" after the nose guard appeared in one game during the 2022 and '23 seasons due to a series of family tragedies.

Evans is a critical part of the Wolfpack's defensive plans for the coming season, making the resolution of his case one of the keys to NC State's offseason.

"It's a game changer if we have him," Doeren said.

While Evans can fill the role in the middle of NC State's defensive line, he has also been an impactful force for the younger nose guards on the roster.

"He's a great teammate," defensive coordinator D.J. Eliot said. "He's positive, he's vocal and he's already built some really good relationships."

BY THE NUMBERS

41 Yards that Isaiah Shirley covered to score his first career pick-six in NC State's 34-24 win at Wake Forest last season.

50 Colby Cronk's career sack total at Flagler (Fla.) Palm Coast High.

84 Quarterback pressures from last season that NC State will be looking to replace following its graduation losses on the defensive line.

PORTAL PROVIDES TALENT INFUSION

BY NOAH FLEISCHMAN

Three years ago, freshman Miami linebacker Popo Aguirre spent a November night watching former NC State great Payton Wilson fly around Carter-Finley Stadium with ease. Now a senior, Aguirre is looking to follow in the Butkus Award winner's footsteps with the Wolfpack.

The 6-foot-1, 235-pound Aguirre arrived in Raleigh this offseason via the transfer portal boasting plenty of experience after serving as a rotational defender for the Hurricanes the past two years. He helped Miami reach the national title game last season and has worked to instill a championship mindset in the Wolfpack's locker room. What does that mindset look like?

"Winning. Nothing but winning," said Aguirre, who posted a career-best 43 tackles last year. "That starts off every day — how we practice, how we eat, how we sleep, all those things."

Aguirre arrived just days after the College Football Playoff championship game. NC State defensive coordinator D.J. Eliot was thrilled to welcome him aboard.

"He's a veteran player. He's played in the spotlight. He's played in big games. He's played in the ACC," Eliot said. "He understands the importance of communication and sound assignment. It's good to have him because of his experience."

While Aguirre headlines the new-look linebackers room, he wasn't the Pack's only instant-impact portal pickup. NC State also brought in former Penn State special teams standout DaKaari Nelson, a senior who projects to play next to Aguirre, and fifth-year senior Harvey Dyson, who will slot in at the Jack outside linebacker spot after arriving from Tulane.

The veteran trio has combined to appear in 100 games in their collegiate careers, bringing maturity and leadership to the Wolfpack's linebackers. Dyson is known for having a relentless, game-altering motor; a year ago, he led the American Athletic Conference with 8 sacks.

The Wolfpack is eager to see how its revamped linebacker corps will fare with all the new faces. To date, the most-impactful addition to the roster has been Aguirre, largely because of his effect on the team's chemistry.

"He's got a big personality. He's competitive, and he wants to learn," coach Dave Doeren said. "With his experience being at Miami and helping build that program into what they were last year, he's learned a lot. He knows what to do and what not to do in the locker room. He brings some valuable background information to our team in that way."

POPO AGUIRRE

PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE FOOTBALL

BY THE NUMBERS

6 Harvey Dyson's career-best single-game quarterback pressure total, which came last season when he suited up for Tulane in a win at Tulsa.

169th Sterling Dixon's national ranking, per Rivals, as a consensus four-star recruit out of Mobile (Ala.) Spanish Fort High.

513 Total defensive snaps Popo Aguirre played as a rotational linebacker in three seasons at Miami.

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

No.	Name	Cl.	Ht.	Wt.	Hometown
STARTERS					
0	Popo Aguirre	Sr.	6-1	235	Fayetteville, Ga.
5	Harvey Dyson	5th	6-2	248	Cedar Hill, Texas
19	DaKaari Nelson	Sr.	6-3	232	Livingston, Ala.
BACKUPS					
25	Sterling Dixon	Jr.	6-2	221	Spanish Fort, Ala.
35	LaCorian Hodge	So.	6-2	217	Arlington, Texas
15	AJ Richardson	Sr.	6-1	235	Kings Mountain, N.C.
WAITING IN THE WINGS					
42	Ke'Von Carter	So.	6-3	223	San Antonio, Texas
32	Caleb Gordon	Fr.	5-11	226	Gastonia, N.C.
33	Ziggy Moore	Fr.	6-2	210	Pittsburgh
44	Jordan Moreta	Fr.	6-1	223	Union City, N.J.
30	Zane Williams	Jr.	5-11	228	Wake Forest, N.C.

SPOTLIGHT PLAYER

FIFTH-YEAR SENIOR HARVEY DYSON

Dyson is a proven player from his time at Tulane, but he transferred to NC State looking to grow as a pass rusher. In Wolfpack defensive coordinator D.J. Eliot, he saw someone who could help him do that.

"He made it short and simple and just told me what I could work on," Dyson said, describing Eliot's pitch to him when he was in the portal. "That's what I'm all about, just getting better."

The 6-foot-2, 248-pound defender has brought an elite work ethic to Raleigh. He will be counted on to get after opposing quarterbacks and could be in for a big season.

For now, his main goal is to simply keep improving.

"Whether it's a lift or meeting, I'm just trying to get better every single day," Dyson said. "Everything else will fall into place."

POSITIONAL GRADES

★★★★ Among country's best;
★★★ Among ACC's best;
★★ Solid or has potential; ★ Too unproven

STARTERS ★★★

Popo Aguirre and DaKaari Nelson are ready for their opportunity to be full-time starters. Harvey Dyson is a game-wrecking player off the edge who fills the Wolfpack's Jack outside linebacker role extremely well. This veteran trio has played a lot of football and figures to execute at a high level.

EXPERIENCE ★★½

The Pack's starting trio have all appeared in games over multiple seasons. But of the team's top backup options, only Ke'Von Carter, AJ Richardson and LaCorian Hodge have played consistent rotational snaps at linebacker.

DEPTH ★★★

NC State likes its depth. It might even be possible for a few true freshmen to see action. The linebackers room was flipped from two years ago, but the Pack has what it needs to fit D.J. Eliot's defensive scheme.

OVERALL GRADE ★★★

NC State has a good mix of experienced linebackers ready to expand their roles. This position group had to be retooled during the offseason, but the staff set itself up for long-term success.

DEVELOPED AND READY

BY NOAH FLEISCHMAN

If it weren't for bad luck, NC State's secondary wouldn't have had any last year. The Wolfpack suffered a devastating run of injuries and was forced to use eight combinations of nickels and safeties to get through the season.

While it was far from an ideal situation at the time, last season's difficulties did have a positive effect in that they forced a number of players to mature quickly.

"You can't infuse experience into your team; they have to get experience by playing," head coach Dave Doeren said. "There are a lot of guys who have played ball."

The safety spots were hit particularly hard, resulting in sophomores Ronnie Royal III, Brody Barnhardt and Asaad Brown Jr. all earning starts. They're back for their respective junior seasons, while current sophomore Tristan Teasdell has returned after making five starts of his own down the stretch.

The young group combined to post 159 tackles, 3 interceptions and 3 passes defended. Doeren has confidence in all four safeties, though he did note that Royal has "probably been playing better than all of them when you look at the body of work from the spring."

To bolster its contingent of returning safeties, the Wolfpack plucked Penn State transfer King Mack out of the portal. Mack, a senior, is the only player in NC State's safety corps with three years of collegiate experience. He's coming off a career-best campaign, with 58 total tackles, an interception and 3 passes defended for the Nittany Lions last fall.

"He's super positive, great energy, appreciative, excited," Doeren said. "I'm glad he's here. He's a fun kid to coach."

At cornerback, meanwhile, NC State is confident in the room it has built. Senior Brian Nelson II logged 29 total tackles and 6 passes defended last year and has continued to shine in the offseason. Defensive coordinator D.J. Eliot said Nelson "has made a huge jump from last year. He's really played well."

At the opposite spot, NC State expects to start Georgia transfer Ondre Evans. A consensus four-star recruit in the 2024 cycle, Evans is looking to play his first meaningful college snaps after redshirting his freshman year and recovering from an injury last season.

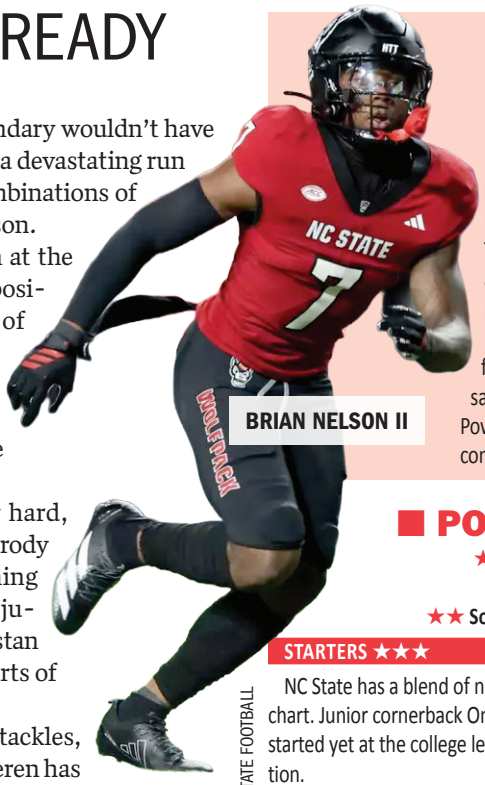
Additionally, the Wolfpack likes graduate Jackson Vick at either nickel or cornerback, while junior college transfer Dy'Lan Johnson and sophomore Caden Gordon are two other quality options to line up at cornerback.

BY THE NUMBERS

23 Total yards after the catch that safety Tristan Teasdell conceded — on 6 receptions allowed — in seven game appearances as a freshman.

102nd Ondre Evans' spot in the Rivals Industry Ranking among all prospects in the 2024 recruiting cycle.

669 Total defensive snaps King Mack played in his first three seasons at the college level — two at Penn State and one at Alabama.



BRIAN NELSON II

PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE FOOTBALL

SPOTLIGHT PLAYER

SENIOR CORNERBACK BRIAN NELSON II

When Nelson committed to NC State last offseason, he was the top-ranked cornerback available following a standout performance as a sophomore at North Texas. He spent his debut season with the Wolfpack as part of a three-man cornerback rotation, and it appears to have set him up well for the 2026 campaign.

"He's always had a great skill set. He's big, strong, fast, and could cover," defensive coordinator D.J. Eliot said. "I think he's just more confident. He played at the Power Four level for the first time last year. He's more comfortable within the scheme."

POSITIONAL GRADES

★★★★ Among country's best;
★★★ Among ACC's best;
★★ Solid or has potential; ★ Too unproven

STARTERS ★★★

NC State has a blend of new faces and returning talent on the top line of its depth chart. Junior cornerback Ondre Evans is the only projected first-teamer who hasn't started yet at the college level, but his blue-chip pedigree will assist in the transition.

EXPERIENCE ★★★

The silver lining to last season's injury problems in the secondary is that plenty of younger defensive backs saw action. The Wolfpack's short-term pain has turned into a long-term gain.

DEPTH ★★★

The Pack's depth is in a good spot going into the 2026 season. While NC State would certainly like to avoid a repeat of last year, the secondary is built to withstand anything thrown its way.

OVERALL GRADE ★★★

NC State has confidence in its secondary. The Pack has several combinations it could deploy, providing options for the coaching staff. Better still, most of this year's defensive backs have more than one season of eligibility left, meaning the foundation will only grow stronger over time.

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

No.	Pos.	Name	Cl.	Ht.	Wt.	Hometown
STARTERS						
20	CB	Ondre Evans	Jr.	6-0	187	Franklin, Tenn.
7	CB	Brian Nelson II	Sr.	6-0	197	Pearland, Texas
22	Nickel	Jackson Vick	Gr.	6-0	190	Bailey, N.C.
4	S	King Mack	Sr.	5-10	195	Miami, Fla.
2	S	Ronnie Royal III	Jr.	5-9	185	Gulf Shores, Ala.
BACKUPS						
28	CB	Dy'Lan Johnson	So.	6-4	185	Baldwyn, Miss.
10	CB	Ty White	Jr.	5-10	176	Buford, Ga.
6	Nickel	Asaad Brown Jr.	Jr.	6-0	199	Chesapeake, Va.
8	Nickel	Isaiah Crowell	Gr.	5-11	185	Kernersville, N.C.
3	S	Tristan Teasdell	So.	5-11	190	Leesburg, Va.
WAITING IN THE WINGS						
12	CB	Caden Gordon	So.	6-1	194	Lake Worth, Fla.
14	CB	Jaren Sensabaugh	Jr.	6-1	190	Nashville, Tenn.
27	CB	Cam Strong	So.	6-0	183	Anderson, S.C.
24	CB	Michael Tate	Sr.	6-2	180	Jacksonville, N.C.
29	S	Brody Barnhardt	Jr.	6-0	190	Cornelius, N.C.

A CHANGE IS IN THE AIR

BY NOAH FLEISCHMAN

Punter Caden Noonkester, a four-year starter, was part of a lineage of dependable Wolfpack punters. During his time in Raleigh, he compiled the third-best career average in program history at 43.1 yards per attempt.

While Noonkester has moved on after exhausting his eligibility, NC State shouldn't miss a beat going into the 2026 campaign. The staff found an accomplished replacement in the transfer portal, landing Arkansas State's Jackson Waller to flip the field.

Waller, who started his career at SMU, had a breakout redshirt freshman campaign last fall in which he averaged 41.3 yards per attempt, with 19 punts downed inside the 20-yard line during his lone season with the Red Wolves. The first left-footed punter to play for head coach Dave Doeren, he fit exactly what the Pack was looking for in the transfer portal.

"Jackson has been great to be around. He's a guy that is professional about his business," Doeren said. "He's a lot different than Caden, who was kind of a free spirit. Jackson's pretty locked in all the time, has his routine and knows what he's doing. He's a pretty easy guy to have on the roster."

While Waller is a newcomer, the Wolfpack's other specialists are familiar faces. Both of its kickers — graduate Kanoah Vinesett and junior Nick Konieczynski — are back, as is senior long snapper Aiden Arias.

The kicking game featured both Konieczynski and Vinesett last fall. Konieczynski earned the job out of camp but hit just 1 of 3 field goal attempts in the Pack's season opener against East Carolina, opening the door for Vinesett to take over as the go-to option on field goals for the rest of the year.

Despite the early setback, Konieczynski was effective throughout the season as the Wolfpack's kickoff specialist. Vinesett, meanwhile, was called upon infrequently due to NC State's 90.9 percent red zone conversion rate, but he made 5 of 6 attempts on the season, with a long of 51 yards in the Gasparilla Bowl. Additionally, Vinesett hit 48 of 49 extra-point attempts last fall.

Doeren was quick to describe both kickers as "experienced and confident," which is the ultimate combination for a position that relies on immense self-belief.

The same could be said for the rest of the specialists, including Waller. Even though Noonkester's reign is over, NC State doesn't expect to take a step back on special teams.

KANOAH VINESETT

PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE FOOTBALL

PROJECTED DEPTH CHART

No.	Pos.	Name	Cl.	Ht.	Wt.	Hometown
STARTERS						
94	PK	Kanoah Vinesett	Gr.	6-1	205	Rock Hill, S.C.
96	P	Jackson Waller	Jr.	6-2	214	Katy, Texas
92	LS	Aiden Arias	Sr.	6-0	207	Fort Lauderdale, Fla.
BACKUPS						
91	PK	Nick Konieczynski	Jr.	5-11	215	Matthews, N.C.
97	P	Christian Harthan	So.	6-5	195	Waxhaw, N.C.
60	LS	Taylon Tranel	Fr.	5-10	215	Cameron, N.C.

POSITIONAL GRADES

★★★★ Among country's best;
★★★ Among ACC's best;
★★ Solid or has potential; ★ Too unproven

STARTER ★★★

NC State has proven starters at all three specialist positions. Long snapper Aiden Arias and kicker Kanoah Vinesett are looking to continue their previous success in Wolfpack uniforms, while punter Jackson Waller is eager to start writing his own chapter in the program's long history of punting success. They have what it takes to become one of the ACC's best trios.

EXPERIENCE ★★★

All three of the Wolfpack's starting specialists have at least one season of experience as the main player at their respective positions. That sets up well for this fall, since NC State knows exactly what it will get from each of them.

DEPTH ★½

NC State's backup long snapper and punter have yet to see action at the collegiate level, while its second-string kicker, Nick Konieczynski, has one game of placekicking in his tenure. If there's an injury, the Pack will be in uncharted waters.

OVERALL GRADE ★★★

The Wolfpack always has high expectations for its specialists, and this year is no different. Vinesett has the potential to be one of the ACC's top kickers, while Waller is an emerging star.

SPOTLIGHT PLAYER

JUNIOR PUNTER JACKSON WALLER

Waller is well aware of NC State's long history of successful punters. One of the main reasons he transferred from Arkansas State was because of the NFL success A.J. Cole III and Trenton Gill have enjoyed after shining for the Wolfpack.

"My main goal is to make the NFL like the rest of those guys," Waller said. "I feel there is no other place in America that produces that many specialists."

Waller has three more years of eligibility in which to develop within NC State's program. He got a taste of college football at Arkansas State and is looking to use that experience as a foundation.

BY THE NUMBERS

1 Total number of extra points Kanoah Vinesett has missed in his career. He's 83 of 84 in his two seasons as NC State's kicking specialist.

3 Punts that Jackson Waller landed inside Appalachian State's 20-yard line, on 5 attempts, in a 30-29 Arkansas State win last November.

18.6 Percentage of Waller's punts that were returned last season. Twenty-one of his 59 attempts were fair caught, 17 went out of bounds, 8 were downed by the Red Wolves and 2 went into the end zone for touchbacks.

Nutrition Is Focus Of Latest Murphy Center Project

The Murphy Center's kitchen and dining areas are being upgraded as part of NC State's efforts to modernize its football headquarters.

RENDERING COURTESY NC STATE ATHLETICS

BY NOAH FLEISCHMAN

Each year, NC State athletics director Boo Corrigan and head football coach Dave Doeren meet to figure out how they can boost the Wolfpack football program going forward. Their conversations are aimed at helping NC State keep pace with the rest of the country.

A frequent subject of those talks in recent years has been improving the Murphy Center. The building, which was constructed in 2003, is the program's central hub and has been modernized in ways that were first outlined in the meetings between Corrigan and Doeren. From a new weight room to a state-of-the-art broadcast control room, the athletics department has made a long-term phased effort to upgrade the facility.

The latest improvement is a new kitchen and dining area. NC State is in the midst of a full renovation of the third-floor cafeteria, a project budgeted at $5 million, with funding coming from the Wolfpack Club and its donors.

For Doeren, who takes pride in his program's success at developing homegrown talent, the dining area is an underappreciated part of the Wolfpack's football infrastructure.

"That room, in particular, is one of the most important non-talked-about rooms in a football building — where these guys eat," Doeren said. "In developing players, nutrition is a massive piece of that."

The 14th-year coach polls his team annually to figure out how he can make the program better. One of the most oft-cited areas for improvement has been the team's dining options. That's not necessarily a surprise. There are 105 players on the roster, and not everyone is going to like the food being served on a given day.

Before the renovation, the Wolfpack's kitchen staff was restricted to a few dishes per service. But once the construction equipment clears the Murphy Center, that shouldn't be an issue any longer.

Seen in construction renderings, the new dining hall features three separate food serving stations with brand-new equipment. Of the new areas, two appear to boast their own food prep stations and a grill behind the larger of the two. These will replace the original serving area, which was smaller and had the look of a high school cafeteria line.

"When you're talking about a 20-year-old-plus kitchen and 20-year-old-plus equipment, the chefs are limited," Doeren said. "Having different stations, having a bigger kitchen, having brand-new equipment is giving the chef an opportunity to be much better at his job and create variety."

Additionally, the upgraded dining hall will feature a refreshed seating area. Wooden tables are set to replace the smaller circular tables that were previously scattered throughout the room, while the pillars will be emblazoned with NC State's familiar "Hard. Tough. Together." signage.

Construction began after last season ended and is set to conclude in August ahead of the Wolfpack's 2026 season opener at Virginia on Aug. 29. It will be a welcome sight for all involved, including Doeren, who will have yet another player-development tool at his disposal, as well as a recruiting perk.

"We're trying to continue to build the Murphy Center one spot at a time," Doeren said, "facelifting it into a modern building." ■

Shooting guard Christian Hammond was NC State's first transfer portal addition. He averaged 15.6 points per game to lead Santa Clara last season.

PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE ATHLETICS

REBUILDING BOOM

In Anticipation Of His Debut Season, Justin Gainey Stocks NC State's Roster With Impact Transfers

BY NOAH FLEISCHMAN

NC State coach Justin Gainey spent much of his first two months on campus crafting a roster that he felt could compete in the ACC. He used the transfer portal to his advantage, while also retaining two key players and bringing in newcomers via the international and high school ranks.

Gainey's efforts earned an "A" from The Athletic in writer CJ Moore's survey of the rosters of every high-major program with a new head coach this year. Moore noted that Gainey "did a nice job, considering the circumstances of taking over after just one year under [Will] Wade."

Here's a look at how the Wolfpack's rotation was shaping up as of early July.

Point Guard

Starter: Preston Edmead (6-1, 170)

Primary backups: Kingston Whitty (6-2, 165), Jacari Brim (6-2, 190)

Finding a starting point guard was NC State's top priority in the transfer portal. The Wolfpack landed Edmead, who is fresh off leading Hofstra to the NCAA Tournament for the first time in 25 years.

Edmead impressed as a freshman, averaging 16.1 points, 3.5 rebounds and 4.4 assists on a 40.1 percent shooting clip. He's a dangerous three-point shooter, logging a 38.7 percent mark last season. The rising sophomore is a complete point guard who can fill the bucket (29 double-figure scoring games), but is more than capable of dishing the ball to his teammates (15 games with 5 or more assists).

While Edmead headlines this group, Whitty could see plenty of action as a freshman. The former West Virginia commit averaged 17.4 points, 4.4 rebounds and 4.1 assists at Arden (N.C.) Christ School. He projects to be the Pack's primary backup point guard. Brim, meanwhile, is a depth addition who spent his freshman season at Appalachian State.

Shooting Guard

Starter: Christian Hammond (6-4, 195)

Primary backups: Darius Adams (6-5, 190), R.J. Keene II (6-7, 200)

Gainey's first addition to the roster was Hammond, a Santa Clara transfer who guided the Broncos to their first NCAA Tournament appearance in 30 years. Hammond paced coach Herb Sendek's squad with 15.6 points on 48.4 percent shooting, including a 39.3 percent mark from three-point distance. The redshirt junior will be looked to as a go-to scorer in the Wolfpack's backcourt, and he's more than capable of playing minutes at point guard, if needed.

Behind Hammond, NC State is looking to get Adams back to his former McDonald's All-American form after an up-and-down freshman season at Maryland. Adams averaged 10.8 points on a 35.4 percent shooting from the field, two figures that the Wolfpack believes it can improve on in the upcoming campaign.

Keene, a glue-guy type of player, can fill a reserve role at both shooting guard and on the wing. He's willing to dive for loose balls and get dirty on the floor. The gradu-

NC State 2026-27 Roster

No.	Name	Ht.	Wt.	Pos.	Cl.	Home	High School/Last College
0	Preston Edmead	6-1	170	G	So.	Deer Park, N.Y.	Williston Northampton School/Hofstra
1	Christian Hammond	6-4	195	G	R-Jr.	Denver, Colo.	Dream City Christian/Santa Clara
2	Paul McNeil Jr.	6-6	190	G	Jr.	Rockingham, N.C.	Richmond Senior
3	Eemeli Yalaho	6-8	230	F	Sr.	Jyväskylä, Finland	Western Reserve Academy/Washington State
4	Kingston Whitty	6-2	165	G	Fr.	Mableton, Ga.	Christ School
5	R.J. Keene II	6-7	200	G	Gr.	The Woodlands, Texas	Concordia Lutheran/Boise State
6	Jacari Brim	6-2	190	G	So.	Winston-Salem, N.C.	West Forsyth/App State
10	Comeh Emuobor	6-5	205	F	Sr.	Raleigh	Brewster Academy/New Hampshire
11	Darius Adams	6-5	190	G	So.	Manchester, N.J.	La Lumiere/Maryland
13	Robert Jurković	6-9	—	F	Sr.	Ljubljana, Slovenia	
14	Kyle Evans	6-10	210	F	Gr.	Aliso Viejo, Calif.	Santa Margarita Catholic/UC Irvine
21	Shah Hall	6-11	240	F	R-Jr.	Tuscaloosa, Ala.	Hillcrest/Shelton State CC
33	Zymicah Wilkins	6- 9	260	F	R-Fr.	Rutherfordton, N.C.	Christ School

ate guard is a decent perimeter shooter who hit 34.5 percent of his three-point attempts last season at Boise State.

Wing

Starter: Paul McNeil Jr. (6-6, 190)

Primary backups: Comeh Emuobor (6-5, 205), R.J. Keene II (6-7, 200)

The marquee transfer portal addition (if you want to call it that) was getting McNeil to withdraw from college basketball's open market following Wade's departure from Raleigh. He spent three weeks evaluating his options but opted to return to the Wolfpack for his junior season.

McNeil will be the star player on this year's squad. He's most definitely going to be a fan favorite following a breakout sophomore campaign with the Pack. The former top-60 recruit averaged a career-best 13.8 points with an eye-popping 42.7 percent three-point clip. He's looking to improve on those numbers with the NBA in his sights.

Emuobor, meanwhile, returns to his hometown to finish his collegiate career after spending the first three years with Central Florida, Iona and New Hampshire. The senior is coming off a 2025-26 season in which he averaged a career-best 9.0 points and 4.3 rebounds. Emuobor has a chance to earn critical bench minutes in the offseason and preseason workouts.

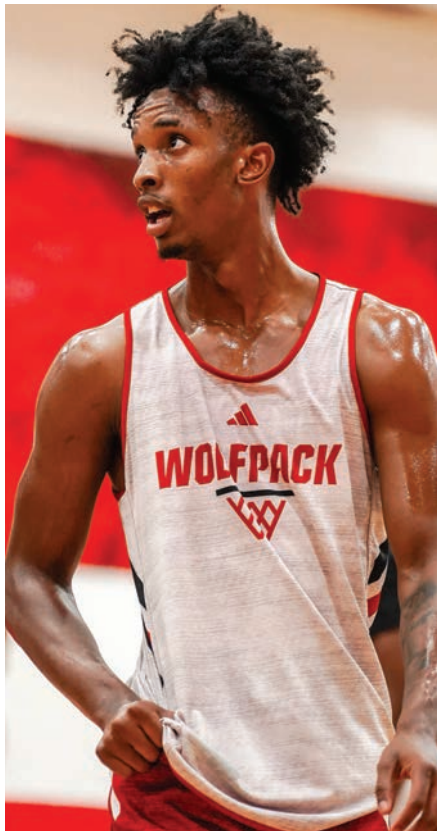
Power Forward

Starter: Robert Jurković (6-9)

Primary backups: Eemeli Yalaho (6-8, 230), Zymicah Wilkins (6-9, 260)

NC State hit the international market to bolster its frontcourt by landing Jurković, a member of the Slovenian Senior National Team. He has a legitimate chance to start at power forward after he shot 38 percent from three-point range with 51 assists in 62 games this past season. The versatile senior is experienced and will fit right in at the collegiate level.

Although Jurković is viewed as a possible starter, so is Yalaho. The Washington State transfer averaged 10.1 points and 5.7 rebounds with a 39.8 percent mark from three-point range as a junior last season. He's also a multifaceted player in the frontcourt, which will make the competition to start at this spot very intriguing as the season approaches.



One of two returning players on the Wolfpack's 2026-27 roster, wing Paul McNeil Jr. averaged a career-best 13.8 points as a sophomore.

PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE ATHLETICS

Like McNeil, Wilkins stuck around after Wade left. He will push for playing time as a redshirt freshman, especially with his explosive ability after shedding weight and working on his frame over the past 12 months.

Center

Starter: Kyle Evans (6-10, 210)

Primary backups: Shah Hall (6-11, 240), Robert Jurković (6-9)

Evans projects to start at this position after averaging a career-high 12.1 points and 8.7 rebounds, while leading the nation with 115 total blocks last season at UC Irvine. He's an agile player for someone his size. The graduate student uses two hands to make a lot of his blocks, and he does so without getting into foul trouble.

Hall, who will be a redshirt junior next season, comes to NC State from Shelton State Community College in Tuscaloosa, Ala., and will give the Pack some much-needed depth at the position. He logged at least 3 blocks in 12 games in his final season of juco basketball, including a season-best 9 against Bishop State Community College on Feb. 19.

By pairing Hall with Evans, NC State's center spot will fit what Gainey is looking for from his big men with a defensive mindset. He wants to be an aggressive and physically strong team on that side of the court, and Hall fits that plan with his impressive play defensively.

But he isn't just a one-trick pony. Hall is a capable scorer around the rim, usually finishing his shots with a powerful, rim-rocking dunk. He averaged 9.4 points, including 16 double-figure scoring efforts this past season, in addition to his 7.8 rebounds per night. ■

Hart was named the Wolfpack's new head coach on May 22, one day after Elliott Avent announced he would be stepping down after three decades at the helm.

PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE ATHLETICS

HART'S DESIRE

Driven To Succeed, Longtime Assistant Chris Hart Takes Charge Of The NC State Baseball Program

BY NOAH FLEISCHMAN

After two seasons at NC State as director of baseball operations, Chris Hart wanted to stay in an on-field coaching position going into the 2007 campaign. But a new NCAA rule had changed the nature of the job. Going forward, he'd be tied to a desk and wouldn't be able to wear a uniform. That didn't hold much appeal.

At the time, the 26-year-old aspiring assistant barely had any experience. He'd spent a season as hitting coach at St. Petersburg (Fla.) College and a summer in Virginia's Valley League. He wanted to prove to Wolfpack skipper Elliott Avent that he deserved an opportunity to serve on the full-time staff, so when a job opened up on Avent's staff that offseason, the ambitious Hart didn't wait for anyone to assign him any work. He started driving around the country to recruit, heading first to Atlanta, then to Florida. Hart was determined to make a positive impact, and he was going to do it in a hurry, hoping that Avent would promote him to the assistant coaching position.

That's just what the Pack's veteran head coach ended up doing. Avent took a chance on the former Florida State utility man, confident that Hart's youth and inexperience wouldn't be a liability.

"I think everybody in our world told him not to do it," Hart recently recalled. "*He doesn't have the experience. You don't know if he's going to be able to*

recruit. That was the theme in college baseball. I don't think anybody would have made that move at that time, and he did. It was probably a stupid move, to be honest with you, but it turned out pretty good for our program in the long run."

Hart not only shined in the role, he became Avent's right-hand man. Taking on more responsibilities as the years went on, he served as the program's lead recruiter, then started pacing the development plans for the roster and manned third base to run the team's offense.

In turn, NC State found immense success with Hart serving alongside his mentor. The two teamed up to produce an 804-465 record with 18 NCAA Tournament bids, five Super Regional appearances and three trips to the Men's College World Series.

And now it's Hart's turn to guide the program. On May 21, NC State announced that Avent would be stepping down as head coach at the conclusion of the 2026 season. The following day, Hart was named his successor.

> **"I know how much work he's put in, and I feel like [Elliott] Avent had a really good right-hand man. I feel like it was the easiest choice to make. It was right in front of them this whole time."**
>
> Former NC State shortstop Brandon Butterworth on Hart

To those within the Wolfpack program, it was an obvious choice. Players raved about him after his hire was announced in the locker room following a Friday practice. Sophomore outfielder Ty Head described him as "the perfect fit." Junior second basemen Luke Nixon said he'll "do whatever it takes" to win.

Former players chimed in, too.

"I know how much work he's put in, and I feel like Avent had a really good right-hand man," said Brandon Butterworth, a shortstop at NC State from 2022-24. "I feel like it was the easiest choice to make. It was right in front of them this whole time."

An Elite Recruiter

One of the traits that made Hart, 46, the right choice to lead NC State's baseball program was his skill as a recruiter, both of high school prospects and transfers.

Chris McHugh experienced Hart's powers of persuasion firsthand. McHugh had entered the portal after a coaching change at Virginia Commonwealth following his freshman season. The coveted first baseman wasn't planning to pick NC State; he had another power-conference opportunity lined up. But then he received a midnight call from Hart. By the time he put down his phone, he had changed his mind.

"He knows how to persuade, I'll tell you that," said McHugh, who just completed his junior season with the Pack. "I didn't think it was going to be possible for me not to take the other spot, but he flipped me. I think he could do that to just about anyone."

Hart, who became NC State's lead recruiter in 2010, is among the nation's best in acquiring talent. His first class included a pair of future major league stars in left-handed pitcher Carlos Rodón and shortstop Trea Turner.

In the years since, Hart has pulled talent from all over the country. In-state recruiting is a strong point for him, but he's also waltzed into Florida to attract elite high school prospects like Turner, now a star with the Philadelphia Phillies, and Head, who turned down the MLB draft to play for the Wolfpack.

"I think it's just the confidence in his voice," Head said. "If he really wants you, he'll get you — no matter what. Whatever it takes."

It's unique for an assistant to have the reins in the recruiting process, but Hart proved he could handle himself. He's maintained the same mindset on the recruiting trail, finding ways to beat out head coaches elsewhere for talent.

"I think that he's very approachable, and sometimes that's hard to get," said

NC State has gone 804-465 with 18 NCAA Tournament bids and three trips to the Men's College World Series during Hart's tenure on the coaching staff.
PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE ATHLETICS

longtime travel coach Sammy Serrano, who has sent both of his sons, Eli and Christian, to NC State in the past four years. "He just loves baseball. He loves talking about players and trying to do what's right by players. I think if anyone could make this as seamless as possible, it would be Chris."

Talent Developer

In addition to his recruiting prowess, Hart has shown he can maximize players' potential once they get to Raleigh. He has an intentional approach to development based on one-on-one instruction. Hart doesn't put players in a box, nor does he force the same improvement plan onto everyone in the program.

"He sees what tools players have, and he can say, 'Well, we've done this with this player, I think we can tailor a development plan that's going to work similarly to that,'" Sammy Serrano said. "That's just an internal baseball IQ that he has of how to develop people."

When it came to Eli Serrano, a 6-foot-5 outfielder, Hart laid out a plan that could help the blue-chip recruit hit a new level as a draft-eligible sophomore. He didn't think a summer ball team would be the best way of getting the most out of Serrano after his freshman year. Instead, Hart put him on a weightlifting regimen to improve his strength and power.

The plan worked. Eli Serrano had 9 doubles and 9 home runs as a sophomore, starring on the Wolfpack's 2024 College World Series squad. Not only did Hart maintain an open line of communication with the Serrano family, he was able to prove his plan worked at a high level. It led the second-year player to become a fourth-round pick by the New York Mets in the summer of 2024.

"I trust him. He listens, he gives feedback. That's what makes him so good. For somebody else, it might not be the same story," said the elder Serrano, who also serves as an assistant for Team USA's 18U squad. "We trust he's going to do the right thing by them from a developmental standpoint. That's what makes him so good. There are a lot of coaches that are stuck in one way, and that's it. That's never what I've seen from Chris."

Hart has a unique ability to connect with each player on the roster. They all learn differently, and he's aware of that. The adaptable approach to getting the most out of every player is a byproduct of that idea.

For Butterworth, a Western Carolina transfer who developed into an everyday player on the Pack's Omaha team and became a 12th-round pick by the San Diego Padres in 2024 after one season with Hart, the idea of being yourself is a critical part of the coach's mindset.

"Baseball is different for everybody,"

said Butterworth, who is playing this summer for the Chesapeake Baysox, a Class AA affiliate of the Baltimore Orioles. "He'd talk about all the great players he's coached, but it would always go back to Trea Turner is Trea Turner, Carlos Rodón is Carlos Rodón, but you're Brandon Butterworth. You're the player you are because you have your mindset, you are your own person. You should try to better yourself every day. You shouldn't try to compare yourself."

A New Era Dawns

Hart has big shoes to fill as he steps into his former boss' role in Raleigh, including 20 NCAA Regional appearances in the past 22 years. But Avent is confident that his former assistant is the right man for the job.

"Thank goodness the next head coach is Chris Hart. That was a part of the puzzle, too," Avent said. "It was the right place and the right time. I wanted to make sure Chris Hart was the next head coach or I may not have made that decision [to step down]."

For Hart, the past two decades have served as an extended job interview, during which he displayed the qualities needed to be a successful head coach in the ACC. He's had his hands in every facet of the program, learning and perfecting his approach all over the field to make himself one of the most-respected assistant coaches in the nation.

"He's very hands-on in everything he does," said Jacob Cozart, a catcher at NC State from 2022-24 who is now with the Akron RubberDucks, a Class AA affiliate of the Cleveland Guardians. "He's more invested than any other coach out there. He's poured in countless hours."

Hart could have left to become an assistant coach at another program with more resources or taken one of the many head coaching opportunities that came his way over the years. Instead, he was determined to make NC State his home for the long haul.

"The grass isn't greener at other places. You hear tough stories a lot of times, so I was thinking, I've got it pretty darn good," Hart said. "I like it here. I love Raleigh. I love NC State."

And now it's time for Hart to keep the program's momentum rolling for years to come. ■

Elliott Avent Leaves A Towering Legacy, On And Off The Diamond

Elliott Avent's phone rang nonstop from the moment his retirement was announced on May 21 until his head hit the pillow that night at his Raleigh-area home. He let most of the calls go to voicemail, but he did make time for two of the callers whose names popped up on his phone: Janis Guzzo and Pam Valvano — widows of two of the most influential people in his life, longtime wrestling coach Bob Guzzo and basketball icon Jim Valvano.

Those two men — along with former women's basketball coach Kay Yow and longtime men's soccer coach George Tarantini — tend to come up often in conversation with Avent. He made sure to keep their legacy alive within his program over the past three decades.

"It's what built this place. It's what made NC State great," he said. "My connection to all the past … is what makes this place so special."

Avent's coaching career came to an end with a 17-13 loss to the host team at the NCAA Auburn Regional on May 30, but his legacy will last forever in Raleigh.

Just ask any of Avent's players. They will tell you he cares for them on a deeper level than most coaches do in today's transactional era of college athletics.

"I've only been with him for a year, but it feels like I've been a part of this program since I was a freshman," said senior designated hitter Dalton Bargo, a Tennessee transfer. "A little less than a year ago, I was scrambling trying to find a school to play at. I don't think Avent even saw any video of me, but he took a shot through word of mouth.

"That's just the kind of guy he is. He's one of the greatest humans I've ever met. This relationship is going to last a very long time."

Avent won 1,103 games as NC State's head coach and made 22 trips to NCAA regionals, along with six Super Regional appearances and three treks to the Men's College World Series in Omaha.

In addition to his on-field successes, he's been an enthusiastic proponent of NC State's philanthropic efforts. Inspired by Valvano and Yow, he teamed up with one of his former players, Trea Turner, to establish the Wolfpack's "Victory Over Cancer" game to raise money for the Jimmy V Foundation to find a cure for pediatric cancer.

Established in 2024, the game has quickly become a key part of the program's schedule each season. NC State has generated more than $150,000 the past three years, and the fundraiser has since been expanded to the rest of the ACC.

Long before his retirement was announced, Avent sought to put in perspective the importance of the fight against cancer, determined to keep it from being overshadowed by the daily ups and downs of college athletics.

"When I pass that torch on, I don't ever want to bump into anybody in the grocery store or down on the beach and talk baseball," Avent said. "I want to talk about [the Victory Over Cancer] game and what it would be like to see kids fill this [stadium]. That's what I'm going to be about in the next stage of my life, because this is all way more important than what we think we do every day."

Although he won't be on the top step of the dugout wearing a uniform anymore, it's likely Avent will still be around NC State doing what he does best: sharing his love for the university with anyone who will listen and recounting the lessons he learned from Valvano and others.

"All that stuff is NC State to me," Avent said. "I'm happy to be that person who can still tell those stories."

— Noah Fleischman

Avent won 1,103 games and guided NC State to 22 NCAA Tournament appearances during his three decades as head coach.

PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE ATHLETICS

BEST FOOT FORWARD

The Pack's Soccer Revival Continues With An NCAA Title-Game Appearance

MALE TEAM OF THE YEAR

BY NOAH FLEISCHMAN

Marc Hubbard exuded a sense of confidence while sitting in his office inside NC State's Weisiger-Brown building in August 2024, just nine months removed from being hired by Wolfpack athletics director Boo Corrigan.

Hubbard had turned struggling teams into contenders at both Division II Southern New Hampshire and the University of New Hampshire earlier in his career. He guided the latter to seven NCAA Tournament appearances and four America East tourney titles in nine seasons.

Winning was an expectation for Hubbard, so the struggles that preceded his arrival in Raleigh didn't scare him. Instead, he had ambitions of not only competing in the ACC, college soccer's premier conference, but also becoming a force on the national level.

Hubbard had seen the Wolfpack men's and women's basketball teams each go to the Final Four, while the women's cross country team had built a dynasty with three consecutive national championships from 2021-23, and the baseball team had gone to the 2024 College World Series.

Hubbard didn't see any reason why his program couldn't do the same.

"I think it was time to make a move to a program that I think could make a real difference right away in a department that really supports athletics and that can give its men's soccer program a chance to compete legitimately for national championships every single year," Hubbard told *The Wolfpacker*, explaining his decision to leave New Hampshire for NC State. "You don't have to look far within the department to see other sports and their success. There's good reason to believe that men's soccer can do it as well."

In the two seasons since he first laid out his vision, Hubbard has been proven right. The Pack went 10-5-5 and reached the Sweet 16 in his first campaign, and it bettered that performance last year by going 16-3-4 and making its first appearance in the national championship game.

Although NC State wasn't able to claim the title, falling 3-2 in overtime to Washington at WakeMed Soccer Park in Cary, N.C., the team still showed it had quickly developed a winning culture. With its warp-speed turnaround, the men's soccer squad is *The Wolfpacker*'s Male Team of the Year for the 2025-26 athletics season.

Hubbard and his staff turned a team that had missed four consecutive NCAA Tournaments before his arrival into a national contender. It was a quick yet intentional process. And while the veteran coach fully expected it, the execution was impressive.

Senior midfielder Taig Healy found immense joy in the undertaking.

Forward Donavan Phillip scored 19 goals to lead Division I and won the MAC Hermann Trophy, which goes to the nation's top player.
PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE ATHLETICS

"It's special to be a part of the culture," Healy said, "and to put the program back where it belongs."

NC State boasted some of the top players in the nation, and they helped turn the tide. Star forward Donavan Phillip led the country with 19 goals and won the MAC Hermann Trophy, while standout defender Nikola Markovic later became the No. 1 overall pick by DC United in the Major League Soccer SuperDraft.

While the team didn't reach its ultimate goal of lifting the NCAA championship trophy in Cary, it set a new standard for what's to come in Raleigh on the soccer pitch.

"We want to make men's soccer a prominent sport within the university and the ACC, the top soccer conference in the country," Hubbard said. "It's a school and a fan base that deserves that, and I think we're there. But it's not going to get any easier for us.

"I think when we take over a program and are rising, it's easier to change that culture quicker. When we get to the top and there's only a little bit more, that's the hardest piece because you have to continue to sustain it knowing that some of the guys had that success. Finding ways to hold these guys accountable to do the little work every single day that adds up into these moments to get back here is a big challenge." ■

Coach Laurie Henes (second from right) guided NC State to its fourth national championship in the past five years.

PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE ATHLETICS

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

NC State Returns To The Top Of The NCAA Cross Country Podium

BY MATT HERB

For the past few years, coach Laurie Henes has been inspiring her NC State women's cross country team with a phrase borrowed from NASA. Before races, she'll tell her athletes to be "responsible to the element and accountable to the mission." In other words, perform your part of the job to the best of your ability, and never lose sight of the ultimate objective.

"You have to control what you can control individually for the team to accomplish its mission," Henes explained.

FEMALE TEAM OF THE YEAR

"That's always our message. Run with your teammates when you can, support each other, but take care of what you need to take care of and be accountable for that, so that the team can have the success we want."

Leave it to NASA to engineer a state-of-the-art motivational slogan. Not only is it useful for putting rockets into orbit, it also helped Henes' Wolfpack get focused ahead of the team's biggest race of the year. Last November, NC State secured the program's fourth NCAA crown in the past five years, finishing with 114 points at the Gans Creek Cross Country Course in Columbia, Mo., to edge BYU (130) and Oregon (153).

On the heels of its latest title-winning performance, Henes' squad is *The Wolfpacker*'s Female Team of the Year. And a large part of its success is because everyone was entirely mission-focused. The Pack wasn't in the mix for the individual title in 2025 like it had been in previous years, but it boasted a pair of top-six finishers in seniors Hannah Gapes and Grace Hartman, and it got gritty efforts from all seven of its runners at nationals.

Gapes was NC State's top finisher, placing fifth overall with a time of 18:51.3, while Hartman was close behind in 18:52.6. Sophomore Bethany Michalak placed 29th in 19:14.9, junior Angelina Napoleon was 40th in 19:22.7, and true freshman Sadie Engelhardt was the team's final point-scorer, placing 51st in 19:32.4.

Gapes exemplified the Pack's determination. She was in 27th place after the first 2 kilometers but had moved up to 17th at the halfway point. By the final kilometer, she was running alongside Hartman and ultimately finished a little over a second ahead of her teammate.

"We all do this for each other," Gapes said amid a joyful scene in the post-race media tent. "We train together every day, and we have so much fun doing it. Today, we just grinded, and that's how we came out on top."

For Napoleon, the race was a struggle. The steeplechase standout was approaching the end of a long competitive year, including a summer spent on the international circuit, and she had to dig deep at cross country nationals. She had been in 16th place at the 4K mark but was fading in the race's final stages, falling 21 spots in the last kilometer. Still, the NCAA title was what mattered most.

"At the end of the day, it's about getting the job done as a team," Napoleon said. "I'm glad I could be a part of that scoring group to win this title. I'm really proud of that."

Track and field can be a solitary sport, but cross country is its most team-oriented incarnation, and NC State has reaped the benefits of Henes' all-for-one culture. In addition to its athletic success, the squad was named the 2025 NCAA Division I National Scholar Team of the Year, posting a 3.60 GPA.

Graduate Brooke Rauber has been part of that culture since the program's championship run started, arriving in 2021, the year NC State claimed its first title. She was the Wolfpack's sixth finisher in the 2025 race, placing 117th overall with a time of 20:02.3, and was thrilled to see the team's camaraderie yield another title.

"It means so much," Rauber said. "I've seen all the championships here, and this team is definitely something special. Every single year, it's a different group, but this one really worked for each other. We've come a long way, and I'm just so proud of everyone here." ■

GOLD STANDARD

Isaac Trumble's Comeback Ends With An NCAA Championship

BY NOAH FLEISCHMAN

After wrestling his way to a fourth-place finish on a torn ACL, MCL and meniscus at the 2025 NCAA Championships, NC State's Isaac Trumble had his knee surgery as soon as possible. It wasn't so that he could return to the mat in a timely manner. Rather, Trumble wanted to walk down the aisle at his own wedding.

But a year after he worked his way through the pain of that previous tournament appearance, the veteran heavyweight from Springfield, Neb., capped

MALE ATHLETE
OF THE YEAR

a bounce-back season with the biggest victory of his collegiate career. Seeded second at nationals, Trumble topped Iowa State's top-seeded Yonger Bastida, 5-0, in the final at Rocket Arena in Cleveland.

"It's been a long journey to get here. I've been doubted my entire life, coming from Nebraska," Trumble said after earning the championship. "I haven't really soaked it in yet. But I will say it was incredible to see my teammates there, cheering me on, and my coaches, and my wife right next to me. I wouldn't be able to do it without her and my teammates pushing me to be where I am today. Great coaches, great training staff. They're incredible."

Trumble's 21-0 undefeated final season at NC State earned him *The Wolfpacker*'s Male Athlete of the Year award for 2025-26. It was a remarkable bounce-back campaign, the culmination of a long recovery process and lots of careful planning.

NC State coach Pat Popolizio used an intentional approach to make sure Trumble was at his best at the end of the season. The coaching staff took great care not to rush him back onto the mat, holding him out of the National Duals Invitational in mid-November.

"I talked with Pat, and we realized the only nationals that matter are the ones in March," the ACC Wrestler of the Year said. "No one is going to care about the National Duals at the end of the year."

Trumble finished atop the podium at nationals after defeating Iowa State's top-seeded Yonger Bastida in the heavyweight final.
PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE ATHLETICS

Sporting a knee brace, Trumble made his return against Rutgers on Dec. 7, earning a 9-1 major decision. It kicked off a run that most dream of in wrestling; he posted a 16-0 record with 5 falls entering the NCAA Championships.

While Trumble hadn't lost going into nationals, he was still seeded second. But despite not being the favorite, he believed he was going to emerge on top once the matches were said and done.

"Maybe I was delusional, but I had convinced myself that I was going to win it," Trumble said. "Which was maybe good, maybe bad."

Trumble earned a fall in his opening-round battle before posting a major decision followed by a 4-0 win to reach the semifinals. From there, he continued his dominance with a 4-1 victory over No. 3 Taye Ghadiali of Michigan to reach the title bout.

With his win over Bastida for the title, Trumble became the 10th individual champion in program history. One of those predecessors was two-time heavyweight champ Nick Gwiazdowski, with whom Trumble frequently trains in Raleigh.

After winning his title, Trumble was quick to give Gwiazdowski credit for helping him reach the pinnacle of college wrestling.

"He helps me with my technique. He goes live with me. He's got two kids. He's my landlord. He's just an incredible mentor for me," Trumble said. "He's got a lot going on in his life, and he's willing to sacrifice his time to get on the mat with me and give back to a program that he did so much for. He's just been incredible the last three years for me."

While Trumble basked in the joy of winning a national title, Popolizio was just as thrilled, beaming with pride after the standout heavyweight completed his collegiate journey.

"Any time you see someone commit and dedicate a big portion of their life to a goal and actually accomplish it, that's what it's about," Popolizio said. "In college athletics, you get rewarded with titles, and that's exactly what he was able to do." ■

FEMALE ATHLETE
OF THE YEAR

FAST STARTER

Sadie Engelhardt Makes A Big Impression In Her Debut Campaign

BY NOAH FLEISCHMAN

Preparing to move more than 2,600 miles across the country ahead of her freshman year at NC State, Sadie Engelhardt could feel a sense of doubt creeping into her mind.

It wasn't a question of whether she could compete at the collegiate level. That was a given. She had amassed impeccable credentials, setting the all-time high school mile record (4:28.46) while claiming five state championships in her native California and four national titles, in addition to being named the 2024 Gatorade Female Athlete of the Year.

Engelhardt, though, wasn't sure if she had made the correct choice in committing to the Wolfpack as a junior at Ventura High. It felt right, but she wouldn't know for sure until she arrived on campus to begin the next chapter of her highly successful running career.

Once Engelhardt started training with her new teammates to prepare for the 2025 cross country season, the uncertainty quickly evaporated. It took just a few weeks for her to feel comfortable in Raleigh.

"I was not a huge fan of cross country in high school, but that team aspect and getting closer with the girls and running for each other really shifted my mentality," Engelhardt said. "All the doubt was pretty much gone within that first month of being at school. I was really happy I made that decision."

The result of Engelhardt's quick assimilation was a debut campaign for the history books. She became the first Wolfpack athlete to claim ACC Freshman of the Year awards in cross country and indoor track, served as a critical part of the cross country national championship, earned All-America status twice and set a pair of conference records on the track.

It was quite a nine-month run, and it earned Engelhardt *The Wolfpacker*'s Female Athlete of the Year award for 2025-26.

For Engelhardt, cross country season was the perfect transition to college running. She had raced at elite levels in high school, but being pushed to be her best each time she toed the line at NC State was a different feeling.

Engelhardt wasn't the star of the team like she had been in high school. Instead of racing from the front each time she heard the starting gun go off, she embraced her role on the team, which was simply to finish as high as she could in each race.

Head coach Laurie Henes was impressed with how Engelhardt was able to shift her mindset.

"For someone at her level, to step in and not be the No. 1 runner and not be running for a national title, but instead to be the best No. 5 in the country, is not an easy thing," Henes said. "She stepped right into it and was so consistent."

Positive results followed. Engelhardt earned ACC Freshman of the Year honors in cross country with a 10th-place finish at the conference meet, covering the 6-kilometer course in a season-best 19:45.50. At nationals, she shattered that mark and was the final scoring runner for the Pack, finishing in 19:32.5 to clinch the team championship.

When it came time to hit the track, Engelhardt proved her reputation as an elite miler was well deserved. She set an ACC indoor record with a blazing 4:23.84 at the ASICS Sound Invite on Feb. 14 in Winston-Salem. The mark was a personal best for Engelhardt, as well as the sixth-fastest time ever run at the NCAA level. She went on to win the league title with a 4:32.59 two weeks later before finishing third at the national meet.

During the outdoor season, Engelhardt broke NC State's record in the 800 by finishing in 2:02.31, and a week later she shattered the ACC mark in the 1,500 with a time of 4:03.28.

Although minor injuries kept Engelhardt from winning individual national championships as a true freshman, she firmly established herself as an athlete to watch in the years ahead.

"It definitely wasn't a perfect year," she said. "But even dealing with the issues, I can't really complain. I'd deal with those issues again if it meant I'd PR and run faster." ■

Engelhardt opened her collegiate career by winning ACC Freshman of the Year honors in both cross country and indoor track.
PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE ATHLETICS

Quarterback CJ Bailey threw for 2 touchdowns and rushed for another in NC State's 48-36 victory over No. 8 Georgia Tech last November.
PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE ATHLETICS

RED-LETTER DAYS

NC State Celebrates Individual, Team Triumphs

BY NOAH FLEISCHMAN

NC State's 2025-26 athletics year was another strong showing across the board. From women's cross country claiming its fourth national championship in the past five years to another individual NCAA swimming title, the Wolfpack turned heads on the grand stage once again.

Here are some of the highlights from NC State's most recent athletics campaign.

Best Male Rookie

From the moment freshman outfielder Rett Johnson arrived on NC State's campus last fall, he had the attention of everyone in the baseball program. His work ethic was as strong as anyone on the roster, and his hitting approach proved effective against most of the Wolfpack's pitching staff.

"He stood out to me with just how hard he works," sophomore outfielder Ty Head said in February. "He's a gritty player, doesn't get out a lot. I saw flashes of myself a little bit. I really love him. He's a competitor, and I love that."

Those first impressions proved accurate when Johnson began to face opposing pitchers.

The Youngsville, N.C., native turned in a team-best .381 batting average to go with 10 doubles, a home run, 31 RBI and 53 runs scored in his debut campaign. He earned multiple Freshman All-America honors after boasting the best batting average among all first-year players nationally, and he was a second-team All-ACC and All-Freshman Team selection.

In addition to his Wolfpack success, Johnson was named to the USA Baseball Collegiate National Team after a breakout debut season in Raleigh.

Johnson, who stands 5-foot-9, has the skill set to build on his illustrious freshman season and could quickly develop into one of the top outfielders in the country.

Best Female Rookie

Long before Sadie Engelhardt made her collegiate debut at NC State, she was among the most-anticipated freshmen in the country. She set the all-time high school mile record (4:28.46), while claiming five state championships and four national titles, in addition to being named the 2024 Gatorade Female Athlete of the Year.

It's safe to say there were high expectations surrounding Engelhardt when she donned the red and white, and she more than delivered. Last November, she helped the cross country team win yet another national title as the 51st overall finisher at the NCAA Championships.

Later, she earned All-America status in both indoor and outdoor track and set two ACC records on the oval.

After just one college season, Engelhardt holds conference records in the indoor mile (4:23.84) and outdoor 1,500 (4:03.28), in addition to setting an NC State mark in the 800 (2:02.31).

While nagging injuries might have hindered her national championship bids in indoor and outdoor track, Engelhardt's standout freshman season laid the foundation for a big career with the Wolfpack.

Best Male Team Performance

Despite dropping four of five going into a prime-time clash with No. 8 Georgia Tech on Nov. 1, the NC State football team had a sense of confidence that it could compete with the unbeaten Yellow Jackets inside a raucous Carter-Finley Stadium.

That feeling was validated by the end of the night. NC State earned its highest-ranked win since 2012 when it defeated the visitors, 48-36, setting off a wild field-storm after the clock hit zero.

"Resiliency is what this place is about," Wolfpack coach Dave Doeren said afterward. "It's why I've always loved NC State. It's definitely a part of my DNA. The harder it gets, sometimes I think the better we are."

Redshirt freshman running back Jayden "Duke" Scott, who started in place of an injured Hollywood Smothers, rushed for a career-best 196 yards to pace the offense. Sophomore quarterback CJ Bailey added 340 passing yards with 3 total touchdowns to snap Georgia Tech's eight-game winning streak.

The victory, in which NC State amassed 583 yards of total offense, sparked a late-season turnaround. The Pack won four of its last five games to reach the eight-win mark for the eighth time in Doeren's first 13 seasons in Raleigh.

Best Female Team Performance

After playing 15 ranked opponents during the regular season, the NC State women's tennis team arrived at the ACC Tournament in Cary this past April with a sense of confidence that it could hang with anyone.

The Wolfpack knew if it wanted to win the title, it would have to take down the best in the country, and that's exactly what it did. NC State rolled past No. 21 Cal, No. 6 North Carolina and No. 7 Virginia en route to its second-ever conference title. The Pack dropped only two singles matches the entire tournament, going 12-2 over a 72-hour span.

Sophomore Mia Slama earned the tournament's Most Valuable Player award after she went undefeated and clinched two of the matches herself. Against defending national champion Reese Brantmeier of UNC, Slama battled back from match point to claim a 4-6, 7-6, 7-5 victory.

Best Male Individual Performance

Junior forward Donavan Phillip returned to NC State for his third collegiate season, even though he was a third-round pick in the 2025 Major League Soccer SuperDraft. His decision to lace up his cleats for the Wolfpack once more paid massive dividends. The Castries, Saint Lucia, native went from being a part of the Pack's goal-scoring attack to being the focal point of the offense.

Phillip proved during the nonconference season that he was one of the top attacking players in the country. After opening the campaign with 6 goals in the Pack's first six games, he put together a breakout performance in Game 7, posting 4 goals in the opening 30 minutes of a 7-0 victory over William & Mary on Sept. 16.

It didn't take long for Phillip to find the back of the net against the Tribe. He scored his first goal in the third minute of play, then tacked on the next three in the 20th, 27th and 28th minutes before being substituted out following his final tally.

Phillip went on to lead Division I with 19 goals on the season. He was named a first-team All-American and won the ACC Offensive Player of the Year award and the MAC Hermann Trophy, with the latter going to the nation's top player.

Best Female Individual Performance

Eneli Jefimova showed up at NC State with a decorated international swimming résumé. She was a 14-time gold medalist at the senior, junior and U23 levels and a two-time Olympian representing her native Estonia.

In her debut season at the American collegiate level, she didn't disappoint.

Jefimova cruised to the ACC title in the 100-yard breaststroke, setting a meet record in the preliminary heats (57.39) and earning the conference crown with ease. She then shattered the NC State program record in the event en route to an NCAA championship (56.30).

"Even if I'm coming from Europe, and I'm far away from home, I'm still capable of doing [big things]," Jefimova told the ESPN broadcast on the pool deck after she claimed the first national title of her career. "I'm proud to represent NC State and the Wolfpack women."

With her effort in Atlanta, Jefimova became the fourth female individual national champion in the history of NC State's swimming and diving program. She used an elite kick to surge from the middle of the pack and win the race by seven-tenths of a second, posting the fifth-fastest time ever in the collegiate event. ■

Eneli Jefimova became the fourth NC State swimmer to win a women's national championship when she captured the title in the 100-yard breaststroke.

PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE ATHLETICS

Wrestling Pioneers Helped Lay The Foundation For One Of NC State's Most Decorated Programs

BY TIM PEELER

When pioneers pass, there's always great mourning and sadness. But it also creates the opportunity to properly put into context their impact and importance.

NC State's wrestling program suffered two significant losses in recent months, both of whom laid the foundation for one of Wolfpack athletics' most successful programs of the past half century.

Coach Bob Guzzo and two-time All-America wrestler Matt Reiss excelled in different ways for the Pack, yet both set the championship tone for a still-thriving program now under the guidance of Pat Popolizio.

Guzzo, a recent inductee into the NC State Athletic Hall of Fame, died on May 16 in Raleigh at the age of 82. Reiss, who won the Wolfpack's first individual national title, died on June 4 at the age of 65 at his home in Bethlehem, Pa.

Their legacies are interlinked — both came from the wrestling-rich fields of Eastern Pennsylvania, and their successful careers in Raleigh helped build one of the ACC's most dominant programs.

During Bob Guzzo's tenure as head coach, NC State produced 86 individual ACC champions, 24 All-Americans and four national champs.

PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE ATHLETICS

Dramatic Changes

Since Guzzo arrived in the fall of 1974, the Wolfpack has won 21 ACC titles and produced 10 individual NCAA champions. Reiss was the first of those titlists, winning the 167-pound crown as a true freshman in 1980 in Corvallis, Ore.

And who does NC State have to thank for sparking that success? Former Wolfpack football players Rosie and Chuck Amato, who had grown up with Guzzo in Easton, Pa. When wresting coach Jerry Daniels stepped down in the summer of 1974, first Rosie then Chuck suggested to athletics director Willis Casey that he take a look at Guzzo, their hometown friend.

Guzzo had been an NAIA champion at wrestling power East Stroudsburg University and found early-career success as a coach at Easton's Wilson High School and at the State University of New York at Canton.

His arrival elevated a program coached by Al Crawford and Daniels that was successful but could never quite get to the top of the pile during a time when Maryland dominated ACC wrestling, winning 20 consecutive championships beginning with the league's founding in 1953-54.

Daniels had taken over as head coach during one of the most traumatic times in the history of the program in 1967, when Crawford suffered a heart attack during a match against Georgia Tech and died on the mats at Reynolds Coliseum.

Daniels, who was undefeated as a college wrestler at Appalachian State, took over the Wolfpack for the next seven seasons, compiling a 60-36-1 record in dual meets but never winning an ACC title.

Casey revamped some of the Olympic sports during an era when football, basketball, baseball and swimming were winning league titles just about every year. He added women's sports to the department and made changes in men's soccer and lacrosse. In the summer of '74, Daniels resigned his post as wrestling coach to become a physical education instructor primarily teaching introductory wrestling classes at Carmichael Gym.

"Willis was a tough guy, and it was somewhat comical back then because you felt like you were fighting for your job every day you came to the office," Guzzo said in a 2025 interview. "He was a tough, smart man who was always very demanding.

"One of Willis' philosophies was that he didn't think anybody could coach. He thought it was always about getting the best players and athletes. I was from Pennsylvania, and I knew I could get some of the best wrestlers in the country to come down here."

That had worked for Pennsylvania native and Penn State graduate Earle Edwards, the NC State football coach

who recruited both Amato brothers and scores of other Keystone State players to Raleigh en route to seven ACC football titles in his coaching career.

Guzzo made dramatic changes almost immediately, specifically by ramping up recruiting. He signed 11 recruits for a program that finished fifth in the six-team ACC Championships earlier in the year. Five were high school state champions and two were junior college regional champs. Most were from Pennsylvania.

Guzzo had been a scrappy 125-pound champion during his college career, and he brought the same intensity to his program. He was named the National Rookie Coach of the Year in 1975, and the Wolfpack won its first ACC title the following year, while adding another two years later.

Guzzo also worked to grow the sport of wrestling in North Carolina, through his team's success and his personal rivalry with UNC coach Bill Lam, who had arrived a year earlier from Oklahoma to revamp the Tar Heels' program. At the time, wrestling had little to no presence at the state's high schools.

That changed while Guzzo mentored 86 individual ACC champions, 24 All-Americans and four national champions. He also developed student-athletes through his passion and leadership. One of his former recruits, state champion wrestler Kevin Howell of Shelby, was named NC State's 15th chancellor in 2025.

From 1976 to 2007, a total of 32 consecutive seasons, NC State and North Carolina won 15 ACC team titles each, and wrestling became a popular spectator and high school sport.

By the winter of 1980, the Wolfpack was a well-established national program when Guzzo took his team to Corvallis, Ore., for the NCAA Championships. Anchored by 167-pound true freshman Reiss, the Wolfpack finished eighth in the nation.

Over the next 14 seasons, the Pack finished in the top 20 11 times and in the top 10 four times. Guzzo was named ACC Coach of the Year six times from 1988 until his retirement in 2004.

In 2006, the North Carolina chapter of the National Wrestling Hall of Fame presented Guzzo with a Lifetime Service to Wrestling Award for his career impact on the sport he dearly loved.

Guzzo never strayed from his wrestling roots, even after retirement. He was a volunteer consultant to the program under both Carter Jordan and Popolizio, showing up for daily practice in the wrestling room at the Weisiger-Brown Athletics Building where the program was headquartered. He also held court with his coaching friends, staff and former wrestlers at several Raleigh coffee houses throughout his life, sharing stories and the high-pitched laugh that echoed among the tables.

A Lasting Impact

As for Reiss, a native of Bethlehem, Pa., he went to the 1980 NCAA Championships as a raw rookie, unseeded and just 18 years old, though he faced little resistance in his five matches. He won the school's first individual championship by beating Iowa State's Perry Hummel, 4-2.

He was just the third wrestler in NC State history to win All-America honors; that total is now 61.

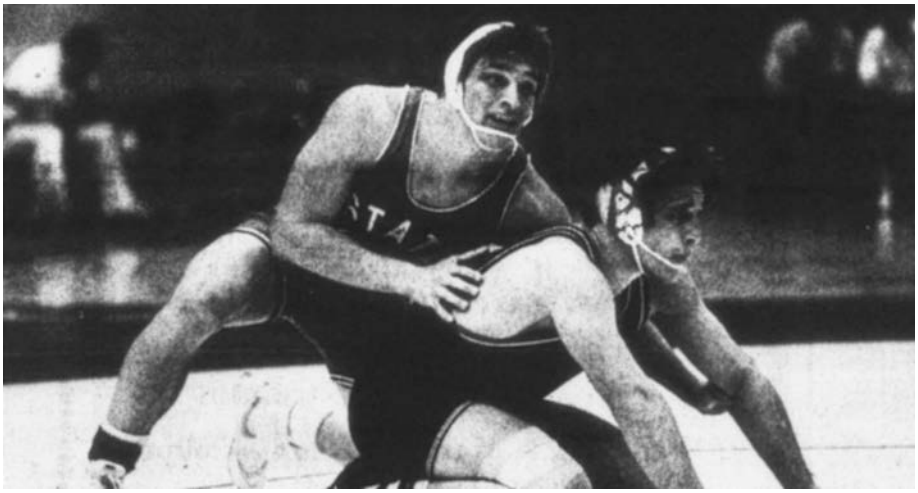
Reiss won two ACC titles, qualified for three NCAA Championships and finished his career with a 51-10 record. He was named to both the National Wrestling Hall of Fame and the Pennsylvania Wrestling Hall of Fame.

He never lost his connection with the sport he learned in the Lehigh Valley and refined under Guzzo in Raleigh. Reiss returned to Bethlehem after his graduation with a degree in vocational education to become a high school coach and wrestling official, positions he held the rest of his life.

"He generously shared his knowledge and passion with young athletes, giving back to the sport that shaped him and leaving a lasting impact on countless wrestlers he mentored over the years," read his obituary.

Both Guzzo and Reiss requested that those who wish to memorialize their contributions to Wolfpack wrestling contribute to the Wolfpack Club's Bob Guzzo Wrestling Scholarship, which supports current student-athletes and the legacy of the foundation they both helped create. ■

"One of Willis [Casey's] philosophies was that he didn't think anybody could coach. He thought it was always about getting the best players and athletes. I was from Pennsylvania, and I knew I could get some of the best wrestlers in the country to come down here."
Guzzo



Matt Reiss became the first Wolfpack wrestler to claim an NCAA championship, winning the 167-pound crown in 1980 as a true freshman.

PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE ATHLETICS

Tim Peeler is a regular contributor to The Wolfpacker *and can be reached at tmpeeler@ncsu.edu.*

NC State Soccer Greats Relish The Growth Of Their Beautiful Game

BY TIM PEELER

During the 2018 World Cup, I happened to be traveling overseas with my wife on vacation. We started in Germany and made it through Austria, Italy, Croatia, Montenegro, Greece and back to England.

At just about every stop, the communities were consumed by their countries' games in the weeks-long international football tournament. We couldn't help but join in. We watched games on massive television screens anchored into the Rhine River; on a projection screen in the middle of a town square in Split, Croatia, with strains of ZZ Top playing in the background; and in the middle of Trafalgar Square in London on the night France beat Croatia, 4-2, for the title.

When the title game ended, seemingly every French fan in the United Kingdom surged through the streets, climbing onto the black taxis and statues of war heroes in roundabouts. It was much closer to a French takeover of the British capital than Napoleon ever attempted.

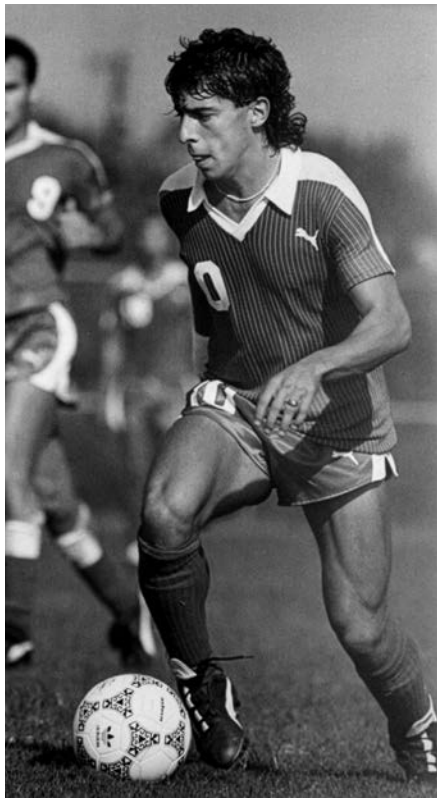
I never really thought I would see anything similar on our side of the Atlantic Ocean. However, this year's expanded 48-team event, hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico, has come pretty close.

And even though the U.S. team was eliminated in the Round of 16, the excitement has been sustained throughout the summer, with teams and their legions of fans celebrating being in the continent's biggest cities almost as much as Americans celebrating the semi-quincentennial.

Is this finally the turning point for the United States to become a relevant force in the world's most popular sport?

Two former NC State soccer players have opinions on that. One of them, legendary midfielder Tab Ramos, was in the maternity room when American soccer was born, first at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles and the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, South Korea, followed by three consecutive appearances on U.S. World Cup teams.

In 1994, when the entire event was held at nine venues in the U.S., Ramos was the centerpiece of the first American team since 1930 to advance to the Round of 16. The success of that summer led to the launch, two years later, of Major League Soccer, for which Ramos was the first player taken in the inaugural draft.



A three-time All-American during his time at NC State, Tab Ramos has been a passionate advocate for the growth of soccer in the United States.

PHOTO COURTESY NC STATE ATHLETICS

So, will this year's World Cup create a similar spark in national interest in soccer?

"It's the million-dollar question, isn't it?" said Ramos, who has been a coach, administrator and advocate for the sport since he first enrolled at NC State in 1984. "There's no doubt that the 1994 World Cup led us to this moment. So much has happened since then, but the aftereffects of 1994 went on for decades here in the States. We're still feeling it, and I do believe that this World Cup will do the same."

Besides the games, soccer has seeped into American culture, with fans from around the world posting their thoughts on seeing the unfiltered U.S., from Bucee's to Costco to Waffle House.

Ramos, who played professionally for 13 years and recorded 81 caps for the U.S. Men's National Team, has lived the change in excitement for his sport. He's a member of both the National Soccer Hall of Fame and the NC State Athletic Hall of Fame.

Another interested observer is Curt Johnson, general manager of the Denver Summit Football Club, which began its inaugural season in the National Women's Soccer League in March.

Johnson, who helped lead the Wolfpack to the 1990 ACC championship and the NCAA College Cup, has also devoted his career to developing the sport he's loved since growing up in Raleigh and attending both Ravenscroft and NC State.

"Hosting the World Cup has thrown gasoline on the fire of American soccer, and the fire is growing bigger and stronger," Johnson said. "An entire new generation of people are being introduced to the game, just as their forerunners were going back to the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, the 1994 World Cup and the 1999 Women's World Cup."

Johnson and Ramos both hope that introduction takes U.S. soccer to the next plateau of success in the international game.

"Each time the global spotlight shines on the game, it inspires greater and greater participation," Johnson said. "I'm not just talking about players' participation. I'm talking about investment, corporate support, city government, state government and national participation across the board."

The cultural aspects of it can't be overlooked either. As Norway supporters rowed their way into the hearts of America, Scottish fans literally drank Boston dry and German superfan Freddy went viral with his take on American hospitality, soccer tourists have injected themselves into the daily lives of Americans who didn't know they needed it.

Who knows, maybe the next World Cup will be projected on screens anchored in the Hudson, Mississippi and Columbia rivers to frothing crowds around the country. ■

Tim Peeler is a regular contributor to The Wolfpacker *and can be reached at tmpeeler@ncsu.edu.*

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